

# A History of India

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*In Two Books*

BOOK

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**ИСТОРИЯ ИНДИИ**

**КНИГА ПЕРВАЯ**

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## Preface

India is a cradle of human civilisation. Its culture is closely linked with that of many other peoples and has exerted a significant influence upon their development. Despite centuries of this mutual enrichment India has maintained its original and striking individuality. The achievements of ancient and medieval India in science, literature and art over thousands of years have inspired the creative thought of nations far and wide. Hinduism and Buddhism, that originated in India, and other religious and philosophical teachings which evolved on this foundation, were to influence not merely the development of many Eastern civilisations, but also social thought in many other parts of the world.

Despite colonial oppression, which lasted for close on two hundred years, the people of India succeeded in upholding the traditions of their cultural heritage, distinguished in particular by the lofty ideals of humanism and a profound love of peace. In more recent times the culture and science of contemporary India have been developing on the basis of an original synthesis of Indian cultural traditions and the democratic principles of European culture.

The outstanding Indian writer, musician and teacher Rabindranath Tagore was and is held dear by the whole of the human race.

The history of India in the last several hundred years is that of a long and heroic struggle waged by several generations in the name of liberation from colonial and feudal oppression. The names of outstanding thinkers and politicians who headed the triumphant advance of the national revolution—Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru—stand out in the ranks of those who fought for India's freedom.

India's emergence as an independent nation in 1947 marked a new era in the history of its people. The country was then faced by a task of historic proportions: it had to overcome the survivals of its colonial past and choose a path leading into the future. The historical evolution of modern India is for the most part characterised by steady economic, social, political and cultural progress that is paving the way for profound change in the destiny of this great country.

Scientific analysis of the history and culture of India began at the end of the 18th century, when Europe once again "discovered" India. Since then a variety of schools and trends have grown up in Indology. Many works on India written by West European scholars are too Europe-orientated and various chapters of Indian history are approached in the same way as phenomena of European culture or ancient civilisations closer and more familiar to Europe.

In India itself great interest was shown in the study of the country's history and culture at the turn of the century, as the movement for national independence gained ground. Indian scholars made tremendous strides in the study of their country's history at this time, subjecting to scientific analysis many interesting works of literature and historical source materials. It was they who for the first time presented the history of modern India as the history of a struggle for independence.

An important contribution to this work was made by Russian Indologists. Prominent among them were I. Minayev, F. Shcherbatskoy, and S. Oldenburg, whose works constitute examples of outstanding scholarship. The Indologists of the Russian school have always shown deep respect for the cultural heritage of the peoples of India, and adopted an objective, strictly scientific approach to their study of the country's history and culture.

After the October Revolution of 1917 a Marxist school of Indology grew up: prominent scholars at the early stages included I. Reisner, V. Balabushevich, A. Dyakov, A. Osipov and N. Goldberg.

The interest shown in India grows from year to year in the Soviet Union. This can be accounted for both by the role which India played and continues to play in the world's historical development, and also by the broad political, economic and cultural ties which have grown up between the USSR and India. A deep affection for the peoples of India and a sense of international solidarity lead Soviet men and women to acquaint themselves in detail with India past and present. In the last ten years alone a large number of academic and general works on India's history and culture have appeared and many works by Indian writers have been translated into Russian.

Soviet historians compiled and published a four-volume *History of India* in 1959-1969 which was well received in the country concerned. This work, some of whose authors and editors have contributed to the present study as well, has been drawn on for this new *History of India* in two books. At the same time use has also been made of the latest research into Indian history carried out by scholars from both the Soviet Union and many other countries.

It is hoped that this book will provide the reader with a deeper knowledge of India and the history and culture of its peoples, and thus promote friendly relations between India and the Soviet Union.

The authors of this work are as follows: G. Bongard-Levin (Part I), K. Antonova (Part II and Part III as far as the section entitled "India during the Transition to Imperialism") and G. Kotovsky (the remainder of Part III and Part IV).

## **THE BEGINNINGS**

### **INDIA IN THE STONE AGE**

#### **Paleolithic Sites**

One of the world's most ancient civilisations emerged in India: it was here that a highly advanced culture took shape that was to exert a tremendous influence on the subsequent development of the country and the cultures of many peoples of the Orient, Central and South-East Asia and the Far East. Archeological finds show that India was inhabited from the very earliest times.

Stone tools dating from the Lower Paleolithic period have been found in many parts of the country. Independently of each other two centres of Lower Paleolithic culture emerged: to the north the Soan culture (along the Soan River, present-day Pakistan), and to the south, in the Deccan, the so-called Madrasian culture. These paleolithic sites were in river valleys providing more favourable conditions for human life. The first of these sites to be discovered was in the Madras area in 1863, and for this reason tools typical of the Lower Paleolithic period in Southern India, namely hand axes, came to be known as Madras axes. Quite different tools were found in Lower Paleolithic sites in the north of the country, massive pebble cutting tools, referred to as choppers. Paleolithic implements have also been found in other regions of the country, in Central and Western India, where the Soan and Madras traditions dovetailed as it were. New research has shown that towards the south Madras axes predominate while as we move further north the number of implements of the Soan type increases.

The difference between these types of tools can be accounted for above all by the different natural conditions, by the availability of stone suitable for tool working. It is no accident that the largest number of sites was discovered in caves situated in the river valleys of the Deccan and in the foothills of the mountains of Northern India. The climate in these areas is more propitious and the fauna plentiful. The main occupations practised by the people of that period were hunting and the gathering of edible plants. People lived in large groups; these were indispensable in view of the extremely hard conditions of life at that time.

An important stage in the evolution of human society was the transition to the Upper Paleolithic period, when *Homo sapiens* as we know him today appeared.

In recent years Indian archeologists have unearthed a number of sites dating from the Upper Paleolithic period. Major changes, stemming from the emergence of clan communities, took place at that time.

Anthropologists maintain that during the Upper Paleolithic period representatives of the Negroid race predominated, while during the Mesolithic period Caucasians appeared in the West and Mongoloids in the East. The taming of animals began during the Mesolithic period and its close was marked by the emergence of pottery and the gradual transition to agriculture.

### **The Mesolithic and Neolithic Periods**

The best known site of the Mesolithic period in India is the Langhnaj settlement in Gujarat. Materials unearthed in that settlement shed light on the way of life led by primitive man in the Mesolithic and early Neolithic periods. Excavations have shown that the main tools used at that time were stone blades and microliths of regular geometric shape which were used as arrow-heads.

Archeologists have singled out two distinct periods in the history of Langhnaj. At the end of the first, hand-made pottery appeared, while that dating from the second period (the early Neolithic) was made on a potter's wheel and decorated. During the first period hunting and fishing were the main occupations pursued by the population, while the second was marked by a transition to agriculture.

Bones of deer, antelopes, rhinoceroses, wild boar and bulls have been found in the Langhnaj area.

Mesolithic settlements have been found in other areas of India as well, in the south (near Tinnevely) and in the east (Birbhanpur in West Bengal). These sites have also revealed a large number of microliths in a variety of shapes. Techniques for fashioning microliths were still extant at a later stage, after man had begun to work metal.

As early as the Mesolithic period development in different regions of India was proceeding unevenly. At the beginning of the fourth millennium B.C. the inhabitants of the Mesolithic settlements in the south of India were engaged in hunting and fishing, while in the north, in Sind, communes based on agriculture were rapidly gaining ground. A similar unevenness in development marked the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods which followed.

In the Neolithic period agriculture and animal husbandry developed further and nomadic habits were gradually abandoned in favour of a more settled mode of life. The most advanced Neolithic cultures were those found in Baluchistan and Sind, which as it were anticipated the urban civilisation of the Indus valley.



To judge by the excavations at Kili Ghul Mohammad (in the Quetta valley, part of present-day Pakistan), Neolithic tribes engaged in animal husbandry and grain farming were already in evidence in Northern Baluchistan at the beginning of the fourth millennium B. C. Their dwellings were built of adobe bricks, and they had domesticated animals (sheep and goats). Metals were not yet known and their tools were mainly of stone, incorporating parts of jasper, flint and chalcedony. Later pottery appeared and finally there were the first signs of metal being used. The bones from local breeds of livestock found there during excavations serve as an argument for the point of view that the crops grown in Baluchistan were local in origin. Similar cultures were discovered in Rana Ghundai, in Eastern Baluchistan, which reveal definite similarities with the Neolithic culture of Iran.

Excavations at Damb Sadaat (not far from Kili Ghul Mohammad) revealed a well-defined stratigraphical record of the Neolithic and early Chalcolithic periods. The radiocarbon method has enabled archeologists to date the earliest layer as stemming from the twenty-seventh or twenty-sixth century B. C. The stratum dating from the next period (twenty-sixth to twenty-third centuries B.C.) can be distinguished thanks to terra-cotta figurines, glazed pottery and various copper objects.

Meanwhile in the northern regions such as Kashmir (e.g., the Burzahom settlement near Shrinagar) Neolithic cultures of a more primitive type have been found. Ancient dwellings were located in pits dug in the clayey soil. Hearths were found near the entrances to the pits and the pottery produced was hand-made and of coarse workmanship. A large number of bone harpoons, awls, needles, etc., were unearthed. The main pursuit of the inhabitants was fishing. The transition to land cultivation took place here at a later date, between the nineteenth and seventeenth centuries B. C. By then occasional buildings of clay or adobe bricks are to be found.

The best known Neolithic settlements in the southern part of the country are those unearthed at Sanganakallu (Bellary district) and Piklihal. Traceable to the early Neolithic period are polished stone tools and hand-made pottery, dating approximately from the twenty-first century B.C. By this time sheep and goats had been domesticated and dwellings were built mainly on hills or in small gullies between hills.

The men of the Piklihal settlement were animal breeders and tillers of the land. Enclosures specially designed for livestock have been found there, and dwellings were built of clay and bamboo. Some scholars hold that these settlements were founded by Iranian tribes that had penetrated these areas. However this point of view contradicts existing evidence which points to local traditions.

Two specific zones are to be distinguished among the Neolithic cultures of Eastern India: Bihar-Orissa and Assam. The latter culture

betrays the influence of Neolithic cultures of South-East Asia while local features predominate in the early cultures of Bihar-Orissa.

While Neolithic and early Chalcolithic cultures were developing in Northern, Eastern and Southern India there already existed an advanced urban civilisation of the Bronze Age in the Indus valley.

### **THE HARAPPAN CIVILISATION**

It was at one time commonly held by scholars that civilisation in India had emerged at a late date. Indeed it was assumed by some scholars that civilisation had been brought from outside by Aryan tribes. Frequent mention was made of the isolated nature of ancient Indian culture, and its backwardness in relation to the cultures of other countries of the Ancient East.

The discovery and study of the Harappan civilisation provided striking proof of the ancient and highly original nature of Indian culture. In 1875 the British archeologist Alexander Cunningham discovered in Harappa (the Multan district of the West Punjab in present-day Pakistan) a seal with an unknown inscription, however scientific excavations were only begun in the third decade of this century. Indian archeologists D. R. Sahni and R. D. Banerji unearthed ancient cities in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro (in the Larkhana district, Sind, modern Pakistan). Since then this civilisation has provided a subject of vital interest for historians and archeologists of different countries.

### **Theories as to the Origin of the Harappan Civilisation**

One of the most complex questions connected with the study of the Harappan civilisation is that of its origin. Various ideas have been put forward: references to a Sumerian foundation for the Harappan culture, or the founding of the latter by Indo-Aryan tribes, which would have meant that the Harappan civilisation was considered a Vedic civilisation. The eminent archeologist R. Heine-Geldner even maintained that the civilisation of the Indus valley had appeared suddenly, out of the blue as it were, since no traces of earlier development were found in the initial period of excavation. In recent years important new materials relating to the local origin of that culture have been collected. Unfortunately subterranean streams have so far prevented archeologists from investigating the lowest strata at Mohenjo-Daro.

Excavations in Baluchistan and Sind have shown that in the fourth and third millennia B.C. there existed cultures there based on farming, which reveal much in common with the early Harappan civilisation, and with which the Harappan settlements maintained contact over a long period (the findings of W. A. Fairservis, B. de Cardi and J. M. Casal). In Sind agriculture emerged later, which gives grounds for the assumption that certain tribes from Baluchistan and Southern Afghanistan had penetrated that far.

It is clear that the Harappan settlements in the Indus valley did not emerge overnight and all at the same time. There evidently was one particular centre where urban culture first developed and from which men gradually moved out to found other settlements farther afield. Of particular interest in this connection is the work of the French archeologist J. M. Casal concerned with the Amri settlement: he established a stratigraphy extending from the pre-Harappan period to the late-Harappan period. Here one can trace the local development of the various cultures: from the time when most of the pottery was hand-made, without the potter's wheel, when buildings and the use of metal were rare, up until more advanced stages distinguished by decorated pottery and more durable buildings of unburnt brick. The lower strata of the pre-Harappan period reveal similarities with the early cultures based on agriculture of Baluchistan, and in the later strata pottery is found dating from the early Harappan settlements of the Indus valley. Finally excavations showed that the traditions typical for the Amri culture coexisted with Harappan traditions.

The question as to the link between the Harappan culture and the earlier Amri culture is the subject of fierce controversy in scientific literature. While A. Ghosh is inclined to accept a genetic relation between the two, J. M. Casal holds that the Harappan culture did not take shape spontaneously in Amri, but rather was gradually "superimposed" on it.

In Harappa itself pottery of the Amri culture was found under the town fortifications, and in the lower strata of Mohenjo-Daro pottery of Baluchistan cultures, which fact clearly shows not only that there were close contacts between the Indus valley settlements and the farming cultures of Baluchistan and Sind, but also that the Harappan civilisation had local roots. It grew up on the agricultural traditions of that region, and above all those of the Indus valley, although it represented a new stage, an urban culture of the Bronze Age.

Excavations carried out by Pakistani archeologists in Kot Diji (not far from modern Haipur) showed that in the pre-Harappan period there existed a rather highly developed culture in the region: scholars unearthed a citadel and regular blocks of dwelling houses. Early pottery from Kot Diji shows similarities with the pottery of the farming settlements in Sind and Baluchistan, and also with pre-Harappan pottery in the Indus valley, while later pottery resembles the Harappan variety. This made it possible to trace the evolution of

local traditions. A period that obviously immediately preceded the Harappan civilisation was discovered by Indian archeologists excavating a site at Kalibangan (Rajasthan), where, on two mounds, settlements of the Harappan people's predecessors were found, and later buildings that were clearly the work of the founders of the Harappan culture themselves. The pottery from the pre-Harappan settlements possesses many features in common with the pottery found at Amri and Kot Diji. This enabled scholars to trace the emergence and development of Harappan culture, and also the coexistence of early Harappan culture and traditions with those of the more mature Harappan period.

In recent years Indian archeologists have discovered many new monuments of Harappan and early Harappan cultures. These have given rise to new theories as to the origin of the Harappan civilisation. In addition to the theory that the Harappan civilisation had evolved from local pre-Harappan and early Harappan cultures, the idea was put forward that early Harappan cultures—cultures of a rural type—and the Harappan civilisation—an urban civilisation—could have existed side by side and followed a parallel course of development. Indeed the emergence of urban life, the appearance of large urban settlements provided the new landmark heralding the birth of the mature Harappan civilisation with all its distinctive characteristics (seals, the art of writing, original pottery decoration, etc.).

The trend towards urbanisation can be traced at many sites dating from the early Harappan period in Afghanistan, Baluchistan and Sind, but it is only in the Indus valley that such an advanced urban civilisation emerged.

Highly significant for this civilisation were of course the geographic conditions of the region, including the network of the Indus and its tributaries, that provided most favourable conditions for the development of material culture and economics, and for the foundation of urban settlements—centres of trade and craftsmanship. It is no mere coincidence that a large number of the Harappan settlements are sited along the banks of the river Indus and its tributaries. Harappan settlements have also been discovered in the upper reaches of the Ganges and the Yamuna (now called the Jumna).

Much still remains to be clarified and elaborated in connection with the origins of the Harappan culture, however the theories which link the emergence of that civilisation with outside influence, such as the Aryan or Sumerian, are now only of interest for the historiographer.

### **Confines and Extent of the Harappan Civilisation**

In the third decade of this century when work first began on the investigation of the Harappan civilisation it was thought that the confines of this culture were relatively narrow. Indeed, initially

Harappan settlements were only found in the Indus valley. Present-day archeological research, however, has revealed that the Harappan civilisation embraced an enormous territory, which stretched for more than 1,100 kilometres from north to south and more than 1,600 kilometres from west to east.

Excavations in the Kathiawar peninsula revealed that the population gradually moved towards the south, settling in new territories. At the present time the most southerly of the Harappan settlements to be discovered are those at the mouth of the river Narbada, but it is possible that the Harappan people penetrated still further south. They also set out towards the east, "annexing" more and more new territories as they went. This meant that certain variations of Harappan culture grew up, although taken all in all it was a uniform culture with well established traditions.

Harappan settlements recently unearthed in Saurashtra and the Kathiawar peninsula have again centred attention on the question as to the reasons behind the penetration by the Harappan people of such distant territories and how they reached them.

Some scholars previously assumed that it was only during the so-called last period of the Indus valley civilisation, when the main urban centres were starting to decline in importance, that the Harappan people started to move south and east, while others put these large-scale "migrations" down to changes in geographical conditions or to invasions from outside. More recently, however, since urban centres of the mature Harappan civilisation (e.g., the urban settlement by the name of Surkotad in Gujarat) have been discovered in Saurashtra, Gujarat and the Kathiawar peninsula, it has emerged that the inhabitants of the towns in the Indus valley must have been moving into new territories in order to find suitable land for the development of their agriculture, trade and crafts. We encounter a natural process of the Harappan civilisation's "expansion".

Historians assume that the Harappan peoples usually moved overland and down rivers (S. R. Rao's theory that they travelled by sea holds little weight). Excavations in the Kathiawar peninsula have revealed cross influences between the Harappan culture and local cultures of a Chalcolithic nature.

We can thus assume that variations within this enormous civilisation reflected the presence of a number of different ethnic groups and the uneven levels of development to be found in those regions where the founders of the Harappan civilisation appeared.

### **Chronology**

Scholars are now able to date the Harappan civilisation with reference to various pieces of evidence. Firstly, by comparing relics found in the Indus valley and Mesopotamia (for instance seals

with inscriptions in the Indus valley characters found in towns between the Tigrus and the Euphrates), by spectral analysis of pottery, by the carbon-14 method used in recent years and also by reference to Accadian source materials relating to trade relations with the Orient. Initially scholars placed the Harappan culture too far back in time, basing their conjectures on general deductions concerning similarities in the development of civilisations in Sumer and India. Sir John Marshall, a leading British archeologist and one of the fathers of "Indian archeology", dated the Indus valley civilisation at 3250-2750 B. C. Later, after seals of the Indus valley type had been discovered during excavations in the cities of ancient Mesopotamia, it emerged that the majority of them were associated with the reign of Sargon (2316-2261 B. C.) and also with the Isin period (2017-1794 B.C.) and the Larsa period (2025-1763 B. C.). These findings led scholars to conclude that the closest ties between Mesopotamia and India could be dated between the twenty-fourth and eighteenth centuries B. C.

It is revealing to note that in Accadian records the largest number of references to trade with Eastern regions, including trade with Dilmun and Meluhha, which scholars identify with the Indus region or neighbouring ones, is found in the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2118-2007 B.C.) and the dynasty of Larsa. Great interest was aroused when an imprint of an Indus valley type seal was discovered on one of the cuneiform tablets dated the tenth year of the reign of King Gungunuma of Larsa (1923 B. C.). All these data lend weight to the assumption that the flowering of the towns in the Indus valley falls towards the end of the third and the beginning of the second millennium B.C. When the towns of Mesopotamia were being excavated, seals from the Indus valley were also found in strata relating to the Kassite period, which would indicate that contacts continued during that stage. In the upper layers of Harappan sites faience beads have been found which spectral analysis has revealed to be of the same kind as similar beads found on the island of Crete at Knossos (sixteenth century B. C.). This makes it possible to date the last period of the history of the Harappan civilisation as the sixteenth century B. C.

Carbon-14 dating has necessitated certain amendments to this time-scale. It has enabled scholars to date the early layers of Harappan culture at Kalibangan as stemming from the twenty-second century B. C. and the last is now said to embrace the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries B. C. Findings at the Mohenjo-Daro site point to similar dates: the heyday of that civilisation was between the twenty-second and nineteenth centuries B. C. and it may have lasted as late as the eighteenth century B. C. ( $\pm 115$  years).

Not long ago another means of dating was devised, namely dendrochronology. Dates arrived at by this method with regard to the Harappan settlements again bring scholars round to the theory that

the Indus valley civilisation should perhaps be set further back in time.

When attempting to assess the age of the Indus valley civilisation it is essential to bear in mind the considerable range in time of the existence of towns and settlements in the various regions concerned. Excavations in the Kathiawar peninsula for example have shown that, even after the decline of the main centres in the Indus valley, towns of the Harappan culture still continued to exist there albeit in somewhat modified form. New archeological finds made by Indian scholars in the Punjab and Hariyana bear evidence to the later Harappan settlements in the "eastern" periphery of the Harappan civilisation.

### **The City and Its Features**

The existence of large cities and a carefully defined system of town planning and architecture point to the high level of development attained by the Harappan civilisation.

Archeologists have discovered a number of major cities of this civilisation, of which the largest are Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

Mohenjo-Daro occupied an area of approximately two and a half square kilometres, and its population has been estimated at 35,000 (although some scholars have come forward with larger figures, ranging as high as a hundred thousand).

To judge by these excavations the urban centres of the Harappan civilisation were all based on a similar plan. The large cities consisted of two principal parts: citadels where the city's authorities would reside and the so-called lower city where dwelling houses were concentrated. This latter part of the city was usually built in the form of a rectangle. The citadel would be built on a high brick platform raised up above the rest of the city. This platform also provided protection against flooding, one of the most dreaded natural disasters that used to befall the cities of the Indus valley. Contacts between the two parts of the city were evidently of a limited scope. In Kalibangan, for example, excavations revealed that there were only two entrances linking the citadel with the "lower city". If necessary these points of access could presumably be cut off and thus the city authorities would be isolated from the rank and file. In Surkotad the citadel was separated from the "lower city" by a fortified rampart.

At the edge of the citadel in Harappa a special processional highway had been laid out, along which troops evidently marched or various processions advanced. The citadel was well fortified with thick walls and towers. Excavations at Kalibangan revealed a massive brick wall forming the citadel's outer defences, inside which were buildings of religious and, apparently, administrative functions. In the citadel at Mohenjo-Daro an enormous water-tank was found (width, 7 metres;

length, 12 metres; depth, almost 2.5 metres) which was possibly part of a religious edifice and used for special ritual ablutions. A special plumbing system ensured a constant flow of fresh water from the well into this water-tank. Not far from the water-tank stood public granaries and a pillared hall that would have probably served for purposes of assembly (or as a market-place in the opinion of certain scholars): only the bases of the pillars have been preserved for the actual pillars themselves were evidently made of wood.

In Harappa as well public granaries were found, to the north of the actual citadel, near the river. The presence of special stone platforms next to the granaries would indicate that grain was also threshed there: archeologists found ears of wheat and barley in the cracks in the floor. Grain was probably brought to the city along the river on boats and then stored in the barns.

The ordinary residential quarters constituting the "lower city" were also built in accordance with a strictly defined plan. There were main streets to be seen, which in Mohenjo-Daro were up to ten metres wide. These intersected at right angles with smaller streets that were sometimes so narrow that not even a cart could pass.

The houses varied in size. Some even had three storeys (this can be deduced from the remains of staircases) and flat roofs. These were clearly the houses of well-to-do citizens. Windows as such were not provided, and light and air penetrated the houses through small apertures made near the top of the wall. The doors of the houses were made of wood. Besides wood, beaten silt was also used for construction. Each house incorporated special outhouses and a courtyard, where the kitchen would be laid out. In the kitchens were special hearths, and large vessels for storage of grain and oil. Bread used to be baked in special ovens, and small livestock would be kept in these courtyards.

The poor lived in huts or hovels. In Harappa near the walls of the citadel and the threshing platforms two rows of dwellings were unearthed, each of which consisted of a single tiny room. Similar dwellings were also found in Mohenjo-Daro, which appear to have been inhabited by impoverished craftsmen, casual labourers and slaves. Stalls and workshops were also to be found along the city streets.

There also could have been religious buildings in the "lower city". The British archeologist, Mortimer Wheeler, discovered at Mohenjo-Daro a building raised on a massive platform, complete with a staircase leading to a higher floor no longer extant, and fragments of stone sculpture. He concluded that the whole structure must have been a temple.

The main building material was burnt brick, although unburnt brick can also be found. At Kalibangan burnt brick was used mainly for building wells and ablution chambers.



Considerable attention was paid to the cities' water supply and drainage systems. There was a well in almost every house and public wells were built in the streets. The drainage system in the cities of the Indus valley civilisation was one of the most advanced in the Ancient East. In the streets there were special holes into which sewage flowed; then the refuse liquids were carried off to special conduits and these were obviously cleaned out at regular intervals. The conduits were built of brick and roofed in with bricks or stone slabs. In view of the local climatic conditions, the density of the population and the low level of sanitation and hygiene this efficient water supply and drainage system was of vital importance.

A town of an original plan was unearthed at Lothal (Saurashtra) which was not only a trading centre but evidently a port as well. It was surrounded by a stone wall and the dwelling houses were arranged on a special platform in order to protect them in case of flooding. In the east of the settlement there was a shipyard (218×37 metres) which was linked via canals to the river and thence the sea. Excavations revealed traces of one canal over two and a half kilometres in length. The remainder of the town consisted of dwelling houses. The main streets were between four and six metres wide and the narrow side-streets were no more than two metres across. There were craftsmen's workshops lining the main street.

### **Occupations**

Despite the advanced level of urban construction, the majority of the population in the Indus valley at this time lived in rural settlements and was engaged predominantly in tilling the land. The Indus valley was one of the earliest centres of farming in the East. From the earliest times various crops had been cultivated there: to judge by archeologists' findings the Harappan peoples were familiar with the cultivation of wheat (two varieties), barley, sesame and beans. No rice grains were found in the Indus valley settlements, but in the clay stratum and in pottery fragments at Lothal and Rangpur (in Saurashtra) rice husks were found. This gives us reason to assume that the people of those regions cultivated rice. During excavations at Mohenjo-Daro a small piece of cotton fabric was found which clearly points to the fact that cotton was grown at that time. Horticulture was also practised. The cultivators of that period made skilful use of the floodings of the Indus and possibly employed irrigation. In the opinion of certain scholars (e.g., D.D. Kosambi) ploughs were not known, and the land was worked with a light harrow.

However when pre-Harappan strata were being excavated in Kalibangan fragments of harrows were found and this points to the use of ploughs even by pre-Harappan peoples. There is thus little

doubt that the Harappans made use of this extremely important agricultural implement.

Livestock farming was also of importance. The domestic animals kept in the Indus valley included sheep, goats, cows, and dogs. Chickens were also raised. It would also appear that elephants were tamed. As yet there is no direct evidence to the fact that horses were known, although this question is currently being investigated.

Copper and bronze were the main metals used to make tools, vessels, weapons, and other articles. The techniques of smelting, casting and forging were already being used at this period. Analysis of metal articles has revealed the incorporation of small quantities of nickel and arsenic. Metal figurines were made by the so-called *cire perdue* (lost wax) method.

Meanwhile stone did not lose its importance and many implements and ornaments were fashioned from it; however, no traces of iron were found in the settlements of the Indus valley civilisation. Iron was to appear at a later stage of Indian history.

The jewellers of this period also worked in silver and gold. Rich ornament clearly enjoyed great popularity among noble citizens.

Crafts such as spinning and weaving became widespread during the period of the Harappan civilisation, and likewise carving in bone and engraving on metal, and pottery. Spinning wheels were found in many houses during excavation work. The pottery of the period was richly decorated, mainly with geometrical or plant patterns. Bowls and dishes were made on a potter's wheel and baked in special kilns. Glazed pottery was also produced.

### **Political Organisation and Social Structure**

The political organisation of the Indus valley civilisation is still a subject of controversy among scholars. The discovery of citadels in Mohenjo Daro, Harappa, Kalibangan and other cities justifies suppositions of class stratification. In the light of data unearthed so far, certain scholars have inadequate grounds for their contention that the society of the Indus valley civilisation was of a pre-class character.

The citadel in these cities most likely provided the headquarters for the ruler (or rulers), and his palace; it also provided the focal point of city administration, which also controlled the complex system of urban water supply and drainage. It is more than likely that these organs of municipal authority were responsible for the public granaries as well. There evidently existed a special city council. It is possible that the members of that council used to meet in a so-called conference hall, as the one unearthed at the Mohenjo-Daro site.

Excavations carried out by Indian archeologists in Kalibangan have revealed interesting finds. It was not only the citadel, but the "lower

town" too that was enclosed by a wall and fortified. The citadel in Kalibangan consisted of two parts—the northern and southern. The former included dwelling houses, but there were none in the citadel's southern part, where several large platforms made of adobe brick were discovered. At the "apex" of one of these platforms remnants of altars were found. This gave reason for some Indian scholars (B. B. Lal, for instance) to assume that the southern part of the citadel was a special religious complex and not the residence of the ruler. In this case the dwelling houses in the northern part of the citadel may have been the living residence of the priests.

As noted earlier the two largest cities were Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, and they are seen by some scholars as two capitals of either a single political unit or two separate ones. The question as to the focal point and methods of the administration for the numerous settlements over the extensive territory concerned has still to be answered: significant in this context is the existence of a single system of weights and measures, one system of writing, close similarities in urban layout and building techniques, etc.

A subject that remains very controversial is the nature of political power in the Harappan cities and that of the overall class structure of this civilisation. Certain scholars (such as V.V. Struve from the USSR and W. Ruben from the GDR) put forward the hypothesis that the Harappan civilisation was based on patterns of slave-ownership. However, as yet the data and evidence in support of this theory are inadequate. Other scholars have compared its political organisation with that of ancient Mesopotamia assuming that power in the Indus valley was also wielded by priests, who were in possession of all the land. It is also possible that the form of power in the Harappan cities was of a republican, oligarchical variety.

Excavations have brought to light a marked inequality with regard to property. The large houses were clearly inhabited by well-to-do citizens, evidently traders or prosperous artisans, while the poor were obliged to take shelter in tiny dwellings. Striking differences in the extent of property are reflected in burial practices. Wealthy citizens were interred with jewellery and decorated vessels. The burial accoutrements of the poor were on a far more modest scale. Scholars assume that there were slaves in the Harappan cities, who lived in hovels and threshed grain, carried heavy loads and possibly assisted with the cleaning out of the drainage system. In Harappa, beyond the walls of the citadel, in close proximity to the public granaries and next to the platforms for threshing grain, mean dwellings were found that must clearly have been inhabited by bonded workmen or slaves. In Kalibangan and Lothal no such dwellings were found which led scholars (such as the French archeologist J. M. Casal) to conclude that the power structure in those cities was of a more liberal nature than the authoritarian regime that held sway in Harappa. Again evidence is inconclusive, although it would seem likely that

political organisation did vary from one Harappan city to another. An interesting viewpoint is that put forward by the British scholar D. H. Gordon who suggests that certain of the terra-cottas should be viewed as figures of slaves (they depict men and women squatting with their arms folded round their knees and wearing round caps on their heads). Further Casal singled out a collection of tiny seals bearing a very simple and brief "text" as "identity cards" for workmen or slaves.

Taken all in all excavation findings point to the existence of a number of social groups such as the priesthood, the merchants, artisans, and bonded workmen; there must also have existed a distinct group of military. This stratification led some scholars to regard the Harappan civilisation as a varna type of social structure in embryo.

### **Trade and External Relations**

The cities of the Harappan civilisation were centres of domestic and foreign trade. Foreign trade was carried on both by sea and land routes. During excavations at Mohenjo-Daro a toy model of a two-wheeled cart was found. Such carts must have been used for transporting goods within the confines of the Indus valley. Trade links were established between the Harappan cities and parts of Southern India, whence precious metals were obtained. More recently it has been established that there existed trade links between the cities of the Harappan civilisation and the settlements of Southern Turkmenia (viz. findings made by V. M. Masson at Altyn-tepe).

The discovery of seals, beads, shells and other typically Harappan articles in the cities of Mesopotamia, and also that of Mesopotamian-type seals in the cities of the Indus valley point to the existence of close trade links between the Indus valley and Sumer. During excavations in Sumer a piece of fabric was discovered which bore the imprint of a Harappan seal. Trade contacts with Sumer appear to have been effected overseas by way of Bahrein, where articles reminiscent of Harappan wares have been found. Findings in Lothal also point to the wide scale of overseas trade. Excavations there unearthed a large wharf, docking berths for ships and stone anchors. Ships are depicted on some of the seals and terra-cottas found at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, while in Lothal archeologists were fortunate enough to find a terracotta model of a vessel complete with a depression apparently designed for the insertion of a mast.

Also in Lothal was found a round seal resembling others found in Bahrein and the cities of Mesopotamia.

In Accadian sources there are references to voyages undertaken by merchants across the sea to the countries of Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha.

Some scholars equate Dilmun with Bahrein, referred to earlier, while others interpret the name as a designation for certain areas within the Harappan civilisation. Magan is sometimes sited within Baluchistan, while Meluhha is even equated with Mohenjo-Daro or the settlement on the west coast of India. The question as to the actual identity of these place-names remains to be solved, while the existence of trade and cultural links between the Harappan cities and Mesopotamia is incontestable.

## **Religion**

Archeological findings provide us with some idea of the religious views entertained by the people of the Harappan civilisation. Both within the citadel and the residential areas of the cities edifices have been found which scholars have ample grounds for regarding as temples. There are evidently links between these temples and ritual bathing pools, and also stone figures found in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. In the view of a whole number of scholars the temples and certain of the stone figures were dedicated to a male divinity who is compared with proto-Shiva. One of the seals that have been found, depicts a three-faced divinity sitting in a distinctive "yoga" position on a low pedestal, to which are adjoined as it were small figures of antelopes. The hair of the divinity is arranged in such a way as to form horns. Wild animals are standing at each side of him. When Sir John Marshall was directing his excavations he concluded that this divinity was Shiva-Pashupati, i. e., Shiva as the patron and protector of cattle. It is worth noting that in early Hindu texts Shiva is referred to as yogin, as the god with his hair arranged in horns. This interpretation, now supported by various other scholars, may point to a link between Hinduism and the religious concepts common among the people of the Harappan civilisation. Another fact which appears to bear out this theory is the depiction on seals of animals such as bulls, tigers and others. According to Hindu beliefs gods were associated with specific animals: Shiva with the bull (Nandin) and his consort, the goddess Parvati, with a tiger. It is likely that this depiction of various animals was a vestige of totemistic concepts and that certain animals were the totems of various tribal groups.

In recent times certain scholars (including A. Ghosh) have questioned the assumption that Harappan traditions might have exerted some kind of influence on ancient India's subsequent historical and cultural development, and rejected the idea that the three-faced divinity was a "Hindu" prototype.

To judge by the seals that have been preserved the rites of fire-, water- and tree-worship were practised. In Lothal and Kalibangan fragments of altars have been found.

Historians have made a detailed study of the Harappan seals, and this has enabled them to single out certain of the Harappan people's cosmographic concepts. Many of these concepts reveal direct parallels with the religious ideas of Hinduism.

Of particular interest are the parallels with certain Sumerian subjects, in particular the episodes from the well-known legend of Gilgamesh. However on the Harappan seal in question the hero is bridling tigers, not lions.

A large number of terra-cotta figurines depicting women have been found which points to a cult of a Mother goddess.

Many of the ideas put forward with regard to the religion of the Harappans and the development of their culture are to a large extent mere hypotheses, the viability of which will be verified when scholars succeed in deciphering the Indus script. Yet even now it would be hardly possible to deny that the traditions of the Harappan civilisation exerted a definite influence on the development of Vedic tribes.

### **Language and Script**

Unfortunately the script of the Harappan civilisation has yet to be deciphered, but the very fact of its existence points to the high level of that culture's development. So far over a thousand seals with inscriptions have been unearthed, and in addition inscriptions have been found on pottery and objects fashioned in metal. Scholars are of the opinion that these seals could be receipts for merchandise or amulets, since there are small holes in some of them. It is possible that these inscriptions were made not only on seals but also on materials that were easier to write on, such as palm leaves. The latter would have been extremely perishable and this would explain why they have not been preserved. In view of this the discovery of a clay inkwell was of particular interest.

The total number of characters to be found on the seals comes to almost 400. Scholars have established that they were phonetic signs for the main part, though some were ideographs. The inscriptions are relatively brief. Special strokes were used to indicate numbers. In Kalibangan a fragment of pottery was found which made it perfectly clear that the writing was done from right to left.

For several decades now scholars have been trying to decipher this writing. A variety of theories have been put forward. A well-known scholar Bedrich Hrozny linked the Harappan script with the Hittite hieroglyphic script, although this line of investigation did not bear any results. In order to decipher the inscriptions it is essential first to determine the language which the inhabitants of the Indus valley spoke and wrote. Many well-known scholars (including T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau) regard it as belonging to the Dravidian (proto-Dravidian) group of languages.

A similar conclusion was reached by scholars who analysed the Harappan "texts" with the help of computers (Soviet and Finnish researchers independently of each other carried on this work). They hold that the proto-Indian language (the language of the Harappan "texts") could be regarded as one of the Dravidian group, bearing in mind that this does not imply the contemporary Dravidian languages of India but a proto-Dravidian language, a reconstruction of which is now being successfully done by specialists in this particular field. Deciphering the Harappan characters would be possible if a bilingual were found—an inscription containing two versions of a text in two separate languages. If we bear in mind data already gleaned from archeological excavations that point to the close ties between the cities of the Harappan civilisation and Mesopotamia, there are grounds for hoping that such an inscription will be found.

### **The Decline of the Indus Cities**

Recent excavations have shed new light on the Harappan civilisation that need now no longer be regarded as inflexible and stagnant. Investigation into the internal development of Harappan culture has revealed a number of distinct periods in the life of its cities. After their heyday there followed a period of decline. This emerges particularly clearly from the evidence unearthed at Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Kalibangan, etc. During the so-called later period construction work at Mohenjo-Daro was carried out without any strict plan, and by that time some large public buildings were already in ruins and in their place small ones appeared. The water supply system had also fallen into disrepair by this time. Many structures in Harappa were also in a state of ruin. The active trading of the earlier period was also on the decline. Techniques used for the production of pottery also changed, less ornament was used than before and its execution was of a poorer quality.

The question as to why the Harappan cities entered a period of decline is the subject of fierce controversy among the experts. For a long time the most popular explanation was that the immediate cause of the demise of the Harappan cities and that whole civilisation was the invasion of Aryan tribes. However, more recent investigations have shown that a number of cities had gone into decline before any foreign tribes appeared, namely as a result of internal factors. Among these local causes salination of the soil, flooding, encroachment of the Rajputana desert and changes in the course of the river Indus were suggested.

After hydrological research in the Mohenjo-Daro area scholars came to the conclusion that not far away from that city long ago there had been the epicentre of a tectonic disturbance that had caused the city to perish. Other specialists maintain that floods were the main

cause for the destruction of Mohenjo-Daro. The city was inundated on several occasions and eventually the inhabitants were obliged to leave the city and move elsewhere. It is possible that a number of other cities also suffered from floods. Recently another theory was put forward to explain the demise of Mohenjo-Daro: the change in the course of the Indus River led to severe drought which impoverished the city and made it easier for foreign invaders to seize it.

All these theories are connected with specific settlements or cities; they do not explain why in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries B.C. the Harappan civilisation went into decline. It is possible that major changes in Harappan society stemmed from a perceptible barbarisation of this culture resulting from rapid extension of its territory and the inclusion of areas backward in development. This subject requires further investigation but it is already clear that it was precisely internal phenomena which were the main reason for the demise of the Harappan civilisation and the decline of its cities.

It is revealing to note that a similar decline is also to be observed in the outlying areas of the Indus valley civilisation, such as the Kathiawar peninsula. In Lothal the first signs of this decline can be traced as far back as the nineteenth century B.C., and over the next two centuries ties between this large port and the major cities in the Indus valley, beset then by internal crises, weaken and finally disappear. After the so-called Harappan period in the Kathiawar peninsula there follows a new, post-Harappan period, during which the local culture is modified to some extent, although there is no disruption of the continuity of its development. Excavations have shown that in this area the decline of Harappan culture is in no way linked with invaders from outside, as may well be the case in the Indus valley, where the latter period of development for several cities did in fact coincide with the penetration of that region by foreign tribes. Significant in this connection is the thorough-going work on a system of city fortifications built during the latter period to protect Harappa from invasion by foreigners. Traces of holocausts in these cities and the discovery of human bones in the middle of the streets (those of men who evidently had been killed in skirmishes with the enemy) point to conflict between the city people and hostile tribes from outside.

Judging by excavations the tribes which found their way into the Indus valley belonged to a variety of ethnic groups. They included tribes from Baluchistan and others bearing close similarity to the tribes of Iran. Some groups of tribes did not differ from the Harappan peoples in the ethnic respect and lived in the immediate neighbourhood of the Harappan cities. The foreign tribes which attacked the Harappan cities were not large in number. Sometimes traces of a particular tribe can only be found in one Harappan settlement. Yet at the same time it would be true to say that these invaders took the decline of the main centres of Harappan civilisation to its logical



conclusion. It is possible that some of these tribes could be classified as Indo-Aryan, but taken as a whole the traditional theory to the effect that the decline of the Harappan civilisation can be directly attributed to the coming of the Aryans should be fundamentally reconsidered, although this in no way contradicts the actual fact of the penetration of India by Indo-Aryan tribes.

#### **CHALCOLITHIC CULTURES IN CENTRAL, WESTERN AND EASTERN INDIA**

In the heyday of the Indus valley civilisation the use of metal was only in its earliest stages outside the territory where the Harappan civilisation took root. During the Chalcolithic period the uneven development of various parts of India came still more strikingly to the fore.

Archeological findings dating from this period in Central and Western India reflect the influence of developed Harappan traditions: this influence is far less marked in southern and eastern parts of the country.

The area of the Kathiawar peninsula is characterised by a combination of developed Harappan traditions and more archaic features of local neolithic cultures; moreover in the course of time traces of Harappan traditions gradually disappear.

To the northeast of Kathiawar settlements of the so-called Banas culture (called after the river of that name) have been found. The oldest of these distinctive settlements date from 2000 (or 1800) B.C. They are set apart from others of this period by the absence of stone implements (the "stone-blade industry" was a typical feature of Harappan culture in Sind and the post-Harappan culture of Kathiawar) and by the presence of large numbers of copper items. The inhabitants lived in stone and clay dwellings of a rather archaic type. The pottery found there differs from that of the Kathiawar culture. In one of the settlements pertaining to this culture fragments of a platform were found, such as were characteristic of Harappan settlements too.

Research carried out by Indian archeologists in Navdatoli, Nevasa, Nasik and Jorwe gives us an idea of the life led by the ancient inhabitants of Malwa and Maharashtra. In the Chalcolithic period the people of this area were engaged in agriculture and livestock breeding, cultivated wheat, rice and certain types of beans. They kept sheep and goats. In a stratum dating from the thirteenth century B.C. a piece of thread was found which was a mixture of coarse silk and cotton. This shows that they already knew the art of weaving. Just as in the Harappan settlements, large quantities of stone blades were used, and only few copper implements were to be found. Black-and-red wheel-turned pottery is found such as is typical of all Chalcolithic

cultures of that area. Dwellings were made of durable materials and had an outer coating of clay, sometimes huts were built of wood. Excavations at Navdatoli revealed three types of dwellings: round, square and rectangular. They were small in size, the largest being no more than four and a half metres by three. Carbon-14 analysis has shown that the beginning of the Chalcolithic period in this region dates from the seventeenth or the sixteenth century B.C.

Some Harappan influence can be found in more southerly regions in Nasik and Jorwe. Similar types of pottery and metal implements have been found but in general the Harappan influence is far weaker in southern regions. Certain links are to be observed with the Chalcolithic culture of Eastern India. Chalcolithic layers in Jorwe date from the fourteenth to the eleventh century B.C.

The origin of the Chalcolithic culture of Central India and the Deccan is still a subject of controversy among the experts. Theories have been put forward to demonstrate its Iranian origin, or Indo-Aryan influence on that culture. It would appear more probable however that the Chalcolithic culture of Central India evolved from the Neolithic cultures of the region, despite foreign influences. It is likely that the region was inhabited by peoples close to the Harappans as regards ethnic type. It should of course be borne in mind that during the Chalcolithic period extensive parts of India were not yet inhabited and many areas were only inhabited by tribes at a very low stage of development.

In Eastern India a distinct Chalcolithic culture has been singled out by Indian archeologists—the so-called culture of Copper Hoards and Ochre-Coloured Ware. The founders of this culture were farmers for whom however the occupations of hunting and fishing still played a significant role. They produced a wide variety of copper tools: flat axes, chisels, adzes and harpoons. Different theories have been put forward as to the origins of the founders of this culture. Some scholars support the theory that tribes from Central India migrated in an easterly direction, others that the roots of the culture were Harappan, while the well-known archeologist R. Heine-Geldner held that the founders of this Copper-Hoard culture were Aryan tribes.

However recent investigations in India can be seen to link the Copper-Hoard culture more and more conclusively with the forebears of the Munda tribes. The Copper-Hoard culture of the Ganges-Yamuna basin in the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C. gave way in many settlements to the Painted-Grey Ware culture. In a number of other regions the Copper-Hoard culture was of far longer duration, and it was not until much later that it came into contact with developed cultures.

In recent years new Chalcolithic finds have been made in Eastern India that bear no resemblance to the Copper-Hoard culture. In Chirand (Northern Bihar), for instance the Chalcolithic culture (characterised by black-and-red ware) follows on directly from the

local Neolithic culture. It is interesting to note that the black-and-red ware from Chirand bears resemblance to the Chalcolithic pottery of Western and Central India. Carbon-14 analysis dates the late-Chalcolithic layers at Chirand as eighth century B.C. Soon afterwards iron and the so-called northern black polished ware appeared in this region.

Taken all in all, the ethnic diversity and unevenness of development found in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods were to exert a conspicuous influence on the subsequent course of the country's historical, cultural and social development.

## THE INDO-ARYANS AND THE GANGES VALLEY CIVILISATION

### “The Aryan Question”

For many decades scholars have disputed the “Aryan question”, trying to decide when, whence and how the Indo-Aryan tribes came to India. The question as to the original homeland of the Aryans is also a subject of controversy.

Some scholars see the entry of the Aryans as the subjugation of backward aborigines by highly advanced Aryans, who brought civilisation to India and set up an advanced society there. Interpretations based on the race theory have stressed the racial differences, which supposedly existed between the “racially genuine” Aryans and the peoples of India, and completely rejected the possibility of any independent development and progress on the part of the local population. According to these anti-scientific theories it was only after the appearance of the Aryans that a highly developed society emerged in India and a civilisation took shape.

The discovery of an advanced civilisation in the Indus valley forced many scholars to review their earlier ideas, but echoes of these outdated “theories” are still to be found today. The only peoples who can be classified as Aryans are the ancient Iranians and the ancient Indo-Aryans, who referred to themselves as Aryans and the regions in which they lived as the “lands of the Aryans”. The actual word Aryan comes from *ari*, which in the Vedic period meant “foreigner” or “stranger”, while *arya* meant “connected with newcomers” or “favourably disposed towards newcomers”, and later “a man of noble descent”.

Studies based on comparative linguistics and the findings of other sciences have shown that there was a time when the ancient Iranians and the ancient Indians did live together, constituting the so-called Indo-Iranian community. This is borne out, for example, by the close parallels in the languages of the two peoples and their literary heritage (the *Avesta* of the ancient Iranians, and the *Rig-Veda* of the ancient

Indians), the similarity of their religious beliefs and many of their ancient social institutions. The original homeland of the Aryans, or the territory inhabited by the ancestors of the Iranians and Indians, is held by some scholars to be Central Asia and by others to be the steppes of Southern Russia. Nor is there agreement over the routes taken by the ancestors of the Iranians to Iran and the ancestors of the Indians to India. It is quite possible that this lengthy migration proceeded by two or more routes and consisted of several waves.

Unfortunately, another question that still remains to be answered is which part of India was first penetrated by the Indo-Aryans. The written texts of the Indo-Aryans that have survived make it clear that they settled in the Eastern Punjab and the upper reaches of the Yamuna and the Ganges. This shows that the Indo-Aryan tribes did not settle in areas that coincided with the main centres of the Harappan civilisation; indeed the chronology revealed through archeological findings shows that there was a considerable gap in time between the decline of the centres of the Indus valley civilisation and the coming of the Indo-Aryans to India. The demise of the Harappan centres in Sind took place several centuries before the penetration of India by the Indo-Aryans.

### **The Rig-Veda and Archeological Evidence**

The earliest Indo-Aryan literary source is the *Rig-Veda* which most modern experts date from the eleventh or tenth century B.C. This date refers to the time when the ancient hymns were first collected together and committed to writing.

Later texts of the Vedic tradition—the later *Samhitas*, *Aranyakas* and *Brahmanas*—date from between the eighth and sixth centuries.

In recent years interesting archeological findings have brought to light concrete evidence on the Indo-Aryans of the Vedic age. Indian archeologists (B. B. Lal, B. K. Thapar, R. S. Gaur, J. P. Joshi) have discovered the Painted-Grey Ware culture, which, as research has shown, extended throughout the Punjab, in the upper reaches of the Yamuna and the Ganges, and the valleys of these rivers (including the area around modern Allahabad), in north-eastern Rajasthan, i.e., which in its entirety embraced the regions settled by the Indo-Aryan tribes during the early Vedic period. Analysis of the geographical data to be found in this collection has helped to pinpoint the area within which the various hymns of the *Rig-Veda* were composed, namely the North-Eastern Punjab. Some scholars commit themselves to a still more specific area—namely the Ambala district.

To judge by the archeological findings made at Atranjikhhera the Painted-Grey Ware culture did not extend beyond the twelfth or eleventh centuries B.C., dates which also coincide with those of the

*Rig-Veda*. This has given scholars grounds for assuming that the Indo-Aryan tribes of the age when the *Rig-Veda* was being composed were associated with the Painted-Grey Ware culture.

Carbon-14 readings made in recent years at other sites (Hastinapura and Noh) have shown that the Painted-Grey Ware culture is a considerably earlier phenomenon, relating to the ninth or eighth centuries B.C. (viz. the work of D.P. Agrawal), which means that the appearance of this culture in the upper reaches of the Ganges-Yamuna area has had to be put forward in time with all the resultant implications. Some scholars have attempted to draw parallels between items of the material culture of the Painted-Grey Ware period and evidence to be gleaned from the later Vedic texts, that is to associate this particular culture with the latter-day Vedic tribes—the Indo-Aryans of the first half of the first millennium B.C. (cf. the work of R.S. Sharma and A. Ghosh).

At present it can be stated that there were several stages of the Painted-Grey Ware culture associated with the Vedic tribes that initially settled in Eastern Punjab and the upper reaches of the Yamuna and the Ganges and then advanced in a southerly direction.

Recent excavations undertaken by Italian and Pakistani archeologists in Swat are of particular interest in this context. In Swat, burial grounds were discovered dating from about the ninth or eighth century B.C. Both grey and red pottery was found there bearing certain resemblance, according to some scholars, to painted-grey ware; occasional items made of iron have also been found. It may be assumed that the burial grounds in Swat belong to a group of Aryan tribes that made their way into India at the end of the second millennium B.C.

In recent years, in the Punjab and Hariyana, settlements were discovered, where the Painted-Grey Ware culture has been found superimposed on levels containing the later Harappan culture. There is thus reason to assume that in this particular area the Harappan culture existed up to the coming of the Indo-Aryan tribes.

New excavations have made it possible to speak more definitely of the material culture of the creators of the Painted-Grey Ware culture. During the first stage (in the Punjab and in the north of Hariyana) the Vedic tribes used copper implements, and only later, moving to the south and the east, did they begin to use iron (*circa* ninth and eighth centuries B.C.).

### **Spreading of Indo-Aryans and Local Cultures**

Data to be gleaned from the Vedic texts and various archeological source materials provide us with a general picture of the eastward advance of the Aryan tribes and their penetration of various regions in

the Ganges valley. This was a lengthy process which spread over several centuries. During this period there were various armed confrontations with local tribes, and also hostilities between the Aryan tribes themselves.

The content of the hymns in the *Rig-Veda* enables us to establish the area inhabited by the ancient Indo-Aryan tribes. The most important river, also a holy one, was the Sarasvati; also mentioned are the Indus (Sindhu), the Gomati and a number of rivers in the Punjab. The name of the river Ganges is only to be encountered once in the *Rig-Veda*, in the tenth part (mandala). There is interesting data with regard to the geographical knowledge of the Rig-Vedic tribes: they were well acquainted with the Himalayas, but appear not to have been familiar with the Vindhya Mountains, for there is no mention of these in the hymns. In later collections of Vedic writings there are numerous references to various parts of Eastern India.

The Indo-Aryans' advance by way of regions covered with thick forest was by no means an easy undertaking. They had to clear large tracts of forest and often burn down the trees and vegetation in their way. An interesting legend has been passed down to us in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*. It tells of the God of Fire (Agni) who burns the land between the river Sarasvati (Eastern Punjab) and the river Sadanira (evidently the river Gandak in Western Bihar), and the ruler Mathava Videgha who advanced east together with the redeeming flame. According to the legend the ruler and his subjects succeeded in occupying lands suitable for habitation even to the east of the river Sadanira. This Vedic tale points to the possible direction of the Indo-Aryans' advance and shows that the Videha area (the northern part of what is today Bihar) was the most easterly area settled by Vedic tribes during the Brahman age.

Naturally the settlement of various areas by the Indo-Aryans did not always follow an identical course, and their interaction with local tribes varied from place to place. It would appear from linguistic and archeological evidence that in the Punjab the Aryans had to deal mainly with Dravidian tribes. Insofar as certain traditions of what had once been an advanced culture still persisted in parts of that region, close contacts were possible between the Aryans and the local population. In some parts of the Eastern Punjab the Aryans did not encounter serious resistance on the part of local tribes and were able to advance fast in a southerly and easterly direction, settling new territories. This in its turn influenced the language of the Vedic tribes. Linguistic analysis of the *Rig-Veda* and other *Samhitas* has revealed that the Dravidian languages exerted a marked influence on Indo-Aryan ones, although their interaction was of short duration.

The interaction of the Indo-Aryans and the Munda tribes inhabiting the eastern part of the country was of a quite different nature. Assimilation in the Ganges valley did not proceed as rapidly;

the Vedic tribes by this time had reached a more advanced stage of development, they themselves were more "Indianised" (they were closely acquainted with the traditions and culture of the local Indian peoples and had absorbed these). Many Munda tribes were driven back into the forests by the Vedic tribes, and the Indo-Aryans did not maintain close links with them, although they were in contact with them for quite a long period. As a result the influence of the Munda languages (the Munda substratum) on the Vedic Sanskrit is less marked.

A similar picture is provided by the archeological evidence relating to that period. In some settlements painted-grey ware, which many scholars associate with the Vedic tribes, is found above a layer with black-and-red ware, characteristic of the Chalcolithic culture of tribes in Central and Western India (who apparently spoke Dravidian languages). Recent excavations in the Punjab and Hariyana, as has already been noted, revealed cross influences between the Painted-Grey Ware culture and the later Harappan culture, whose creators belonged to Dravidian-language tribes. In other settlements the Painted-Grey Ware culture can be seen to have inherited the Copper-Hoard culture, which most probably was that of the ancient Munda tribes of East India. In addition archeologists have found a considerable number of settlements where no link can be traced between the Painted-Grey Ware culture and earlier cultures.

In those areas where the Aryan tribes came across the vestiges of traditions from what had once been advanced cultures, the development of the Aryans themselves proceeded more rapidly, just as their assimilation with the local tribes and their advance eastwards. In those areas, on the other hand, where the Aryans were virtually the "first settlers", more time was necessary to settle the areas and this in its turn slowed up the overall development of the newcomers' culture.

As the Indo-Aryan tribes advanced across Northern India (later they were to move southwards as well), the social and political organisation of the Vedic tribes became more advanced. This was reflected in the Vedic texts: of particular interest in this respect is comparison of the early Vedic *Samhitas* with works composed in the later part of the Vedic age. These changes in the structure of Vedic society had a direct bearing on the nature of the interaction between the Indo-Aryans and the local tribes.

Gradually a new culture emerged, which embraced the achievements of both the Aryan and local tribes and was soon common to a large part of the population of Northern and Eastern India. This culture cannot be regarded as an Indo-Aryan one introduced from outside and only with reserve can it be termed the culture of the Vedic tribes of the *Rig-Veda* age, because it was already a specifically Indian culture of the first millennium B.C.

Archeological evidence shows quite clearly that the Painted-Grey Ware culture gave way to the Northern Black-Polished Ware culture,

which in the main dates from the second half of the first millennium B.C. (between the sixth and second centuries B.C.). The latter culture is in many respects indebted to the traditions of the preceding period, yet was by this time no longer a culture of the Vedic Indo-Aryans, but a culture of the Indian tribes of Northern India: settlements where this culture was found range from the Punjab to the lower reaches of the Ganges. By the middle of the first millennium B.C. the Indo-Aryans had penetrated the main regions of the Ganges valley, almost the whole of Northern India. This point in time can be regarded as the dividing line between the end of the Vedic period proper and the beginning of the next, Magadha-Mauryan period.

### **The Main Occupations of the Vedic Tribes**

The main occupations of the peoples of the Vedic age were agriculture and stock-raising. The advance of agriculture and the transition of the bulk of the population to a settled way of life based on land cultivation were promoted by the emergence of iron-working. Iron was used for various types of production activity. Judging by archeological evidence, iron was to be found in small quantities in Northern India in the eleventh century B.C., but its use became widespread only a good deal later (scholars assume that in the middle reaches of the Ganges valley this had taken place in the seventh century B.C.). It is likely that the authors of the *Rig-Veda* were familiar with iron-working although scholars are still at variance in their views on the words used to designate iron at that time (possibly it was the term *ayas*) in later Vedic texts however the term *shyama* or black *ayas* is already used.

Once they had iron implements it was easier for these peoples to settle the forest regions of the Ganges valley, to work the land and, where necessary, to irrigate their land. Iron also promoted more advanced craftsmanship. The fields had earlier been worked with wooden ploughs and hoes, and crops had been reaped with stone-blade sickles, but now the primitive type of wooden plough was replaced by ploughs fitted with iron shares, an advance which opened up completely new prospects for farming on stony ground. The Vedic texts contain references to various types of agricultural tasks including ploughing, sowing, harvesting and threshing. In the *Rig-Veda* we already find references to "locked" waters and water wheels, which can be used for irrigation purposes. The Vedic *Samhitas* also contain references to special irrigation canals.

The people of this period were also familiar with a large number of cereals, including barley, rice, wheat and beans. (Excavations at settlements of the Painted-Grey Ware culture dating from between the eleventh and ninth centuries B.C. revealed rice and wheat grains.) Wide-scale rice cultivation resulted from the Indo-Aryans' settlement



of most of the Ganges valley. A good number of scholars hold that the Aryans had not cultivated rice before coming to India, and that they learnt the art of its cultivation from local tribes.

As well as agriculture, stock-raising also played an important part in the lives of the Vedic tribes. In the Vedic texts there are numerous references to the fact that man's chief source of wealth lay in his herds. The authors of the Vedic hymns are constantly turning to the gods to request that men should be blessed with cows, and war was seen as an endeavour to acquire more cows. Seizure of livestock was the main cause of conflict between the Vedic tribes. The word *aghnya* (one-who-must-not-be-killed) was often used to designate a cow, which probably reflects a certain sanctification of this animal even by this stage. Special ceremonies were designed to protect livestock and the harvest from various types of disasters. Excavations of the Painted-Grey Ware layer at Hastinapur have unearthed bones of a bull, a goat, a sheep, a pig and a horse.

The forms of transport at this period included carts drawn by oxen and chariots drawn by horses.

The Vedic tribes lived in small fortified settlements, which, as can be seen from archeological excavations in the Ganges valley, have little in common with the large cities of the Harappan civilisation. The towns (or *puras*) which are mentioned in the hymns of the *Rig-Veda* were rather more akin to rural centres consisting of small dwellings made of timber or clay mixed with straw and of occasional stone structures, and fortified with earthen ramparts. Such fortifications were clearly far from durable for the hymns contain frequent references to the seizure and destruction of the *puras*. Excavations carried out by Indian scholars at Kaushambi revealed that some of the building techniques and traditions of the Harappan cities could have been known to the Vedic tribes of Eastern India, however they did not exert a decisive influence on the building skills of these tribes. (In recent years some Indian archeologists such as A. Ghosh rule out any knowledge of Harappan building techniques among the Vedic tribes, for the fortifications at Kaushambi are referred to a much later date.)

Archeological findings have also shown that the growth of urban centres in the Ganges valley went hand in hand with the advancement of crafts. In the Vedic texts there are references to a variety of craftsmen—blacksmiths, potters, carpenters, jewellers, armourers, etc. The most highly esteemed skills were those of the carpenter and blacksmith who made agricultural implements and weapons and built houses. Trade developed not only between individual tribes, but also with foreign lands. This was possibly by way of the sea. In the Vedic hymns there are, for example, references to ocean-going vessels with a hundred oars each and also references to the treasures of the sea. It is possible that vessels were also used for travelling up and down rivers. Gradually distinct groups of professional traders emerged.

## **Inequality Stemming from Differences in Property Ownership and Social Status**

In Vedic society there were already differences based on property ownership. Alongside a rich élite in possession of considerable herds, there were also extremely poor strata of the population. References to the rich and the poor appear time and again in the Vedic texts, references to splendid sacrifices and generous gifts made by the first group and to the modest offerings of the simple villagers. In the *Rig-Veda* there are references to the branding of cattle which was clearly carried out in order to show which animals belonged to whom.

In the Vedic writings (particularly those of the later Vedic period) there are details to be found regarding donations and purchases of land, although property rights were to a large extent subject to the "will of the tribe". Cultivated plots were made over to individual members of the tribe, and this step in its turn paved the way for the further development of inequality stemming from differences in property rights or social status. Questions of inheritance became important and land was contested by individuals and by whole tribes. Gradually certain members of the tribal group grew rich and came to constitute a privileged estate in what had once been a united community: they even owned slaves, while at the same time impoverished members of the community lost their independence and became dependent members within their own tribe and village community.

The appearance of slavery is a clear pointer to the development of economic and social inequality. Initially it was prisoners of war who became slaves (the word for slave was taken from *dasyu* or *dasa*, initially meaning enemy), but later some members of the tribe found themselves in a condition of dependence akin to slavery within their own tribe. Some scholars misguidedly assume that the word *dasa* was used to imply tribes which differed ethnically from the Aryans, i.e., they attempt to explain the appearance of slavery not by social factors, but ethnic differences, although there might have been members of autochthonous tribes among the *dasa* slaves. In the *Atharva Veda* there is interesting information to be gleaned concerning the utilisation of female slave labour for grinding grain. In Vedic sources, even in the *Rig-Veda*, there are references to the use of large numbers of slaves (sometimes people are mentioned who owned hundreds or even thousands of slaves), but it is difficult to say to what extent these figures correspond to reality. It would be more logical to assume that we have here an obvious exaggeration, although there is no doubt whatsoever as to the emergence of slavery during the Vedic age.

In view of the overall level of development of the Vedic society that had not yet progressed beyond that of the tribal community the slavery existing at that time (in particular during the *Rig-Veda* period) should be broadly defined as undeveloped, patriarchal.

## Political Organisation

Describing the political organisation of the Vedic tribes is a fairly complex task. This is not only because scholars have little evidence to refer to but also because the tribes of the *Rig-Veda* period and the later Vedic tribes differed considerably in both their types of political organisation and in the levels of historical development as a whole that they had reached.

It is important to approach this question in the context of the overall development of the Vedic tribes, a process which covered a number of centuries and was marked by major changes in economic life and also in social and political structures.

While in the early Vedic period the Aryans were at a stage of tribal organisation, by the later Vedic period and in particular the epic period a class society and a state were emerging.

The Vedic tribes lived in *ganas*, which initially constituted clans or tribal groups, and later units with a class structure. In the hymns of the *Rig-Veda* we find legends describing a past age when the Aryans lived in united harmonious groups, working and offering sacrifices to the gods together and sharing out the fruits of their labours equally among all. The *ganas* were ruled by the *ganapati*.

In the Vedic texts there are direct references to the fact that women were not entitled to be present at meetings of the *gana*, and they appear to have been deprived of all political rights. All questions relating to the internal workings and administration of the commune were decided by the full-fledged members of the community at assemblies known as the *vidatha*, *sabha* or *samiti*.

Scholars are hard put to it to agree on the interpretation of these terms, for the source materials relating to the nature of these tribal assemblies are often extremely contradictory. It is likely that the *vidatha* was the most ancient institution and represented a gathering of tribal elders: unlike the *samiti* it was concerned above all with the deliberation of political affairs. The *samiti* appears to have been a gathering of a broader nature than the *sabha*, but it is difficult to say what exactly its function was.

The people of these tribes lived in *grama*, which consisted of large patriarchal families (*kula*). Clan ties were still very strong, and the influence of the *gotra* made itself felt in all spheres of life. The villages or *grama* had their own administration. Gradually the tribal groups became stratified as inequality based on property and social status took root, and the organs of tribal administration developed into organs of state power; the position of the *ganapati* changed, he ceased to be a tribal leader and became the ruler of a state union.

Here it is interesting to dwell on the ancient Indian legends about the appearance of regal power. According to one of these legends there were no kings at first, and all men were equal and strictly

adhered to accepted moral standards. Later many people started to wallow in pleasures, disrupt law and order, and the strong began to devour the weak. That was the moment when the supreme God Brahma created regal power and the science of punishment.

Another legend tells how men themselves elected a king in order that he might defend them. Regardless of the reasons used to explain the appearance of regal and state power, it is most interesting to note the very acceptance by the ancient Indians of the need for the emergence of state power.

According to early Vedic texts the raja was originally elected by the people who evidently congregated for this purpose at a special assembly. In the *Rig-Veda* and the *Atharva Veda* there are hymns dedicated to the election of kings. One of the lines in a hymn of the *Atharva Veda* reads: "The people has elected Thee to rule." Here as in similar hymns from the *Rig-Veda* the people is referred to by the term *vish*. One of the main functions of the raja was to protect his subjects; he was regarded as the defender of his people.

The formation of the state was a lengthy process, during which vestiges of the former political organisation continued to exist for a long time. The tribal assemblies—especially the *sabha* and *samiti*—continued to play an important part and influenced the appointment of the king. These tribal assemblies were gradually replaced by assemblies of the nobility or the king's retainers. (Later the word *sabha* came to mean the chamber where assemblies took place, and debates and even games were held; it also came to mean a particular kind of legal organ.) The role of the *sabha* and the *samiti* declined as the king's power increased. Organs of state power and permanent state offices gradually emerged. The people had to start paying taxes. *Bali*, which had formerly been a voluntary offering made to the chieftain of a tribe or to a god, now became a compulsory tax strictly laid down for payment to the king through specially appointed officials.

The tribal band of warriors gradually developed into a permanent force headed by a special commander (*senani* or *senapati*). The king and the professional warriors fought on chariots and the freemen of the communities on foot.

Vedic texts provide detailed descriptions of the special ceremony (*rajasuya*) for the consecration of the king, whose person was invested with divinity. The king's chief priest or *purohita* came to play an increasingly important role; he also performed the functions of royal astrologer and adviser. Also of interest is the extant listing of the persons who assisted at the consecration ceremony and were referred to as "king makers". Among them are the *gramani*, which shows that local organs of administration in the village still had a voice in central government. Gradually, elected kingship was replaced by hereditary kingship and power, as a rule, was passed on from father to son. Thus state formations are seen to evolve from the early Vedic *gana*; as a

result of a whole number of conditions these state formations could take the form of monarchies or republics. The territory these states embraced was as yet small. Archaic institutions and features of primitive communal organisation endured for a long period, particularly in peripheral areas.

### **The Origin of Varna. The Caste System**

The existence of castes and the caste system is usually linked exclusively with India, but this conception does not correspond quite precisely with historical and ethnographic evidence. Certain aspects of caste and various elements of the caste system are to be found among many peoples. However India provides the most striking example of the development of the caste system which in the specific conditions pertaining to Indian society has assumed an extremely rigid form.

The very word caste in Portuguese means race or lineage; it was adopted in European languages to designate the rigid groups within Indian society after the Portuguese penetrated India in the sixteenth century and became acquainted with Indian social structure. In India these groups were designated by the Sanskrit term *jati*.

The question as to the origins of caste in India, i. e., this distinctive social institution characterised by strict endogamy and associated with occupation which is restricted and inherited, etc., is the subject of fierce controversy in academic writing. When discussing this problem it is essential to take into account a number of social, economic and ideological factors, and the specific course of ancient India's historical development.

Karl Marx pointed out on several occasions that caste is a vestigial form of tribal organisation. It is precisely in caste that the clan or tribal tie assumes its "extreme, strictest form".

Alongside *jati* there also existed in ancient Indian society another ancient institution, that of social group or *varna*, which emerged in pre-class society, and which later was consolidated and sanctified in class society. Gradually the social groups or *varnas* (Brahmans, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas* and *shudras*) became more and more rigid and came to resemble castes, which explains why the *varna* was often referred to by the term caste.

The question as to the origin of the *varna* is most complex, but it would seem logical to connect the appearance of the social estate, the *varna*, with the break-up of primitive communal relations and the development of inequality based on differences in property ownership and social status.

In the emergence of this specific form of social groups in ancient India a role may well have been played by the specific nature of the social organisation peculiar to the local tribes, whom the Indo-Aryans encountered as they penetrated Northern India.

The warrior élite made up the *varna* of the *kshatriyas*, the priests that of the Brahmins, the freemen of the village communes made up the *varna* of the *vaishyas*, and last came the *varna* of the *shudras* who occupied the lowest position in the social hierarchy. The *varna* had already emerged in the pre-Vedic age. It has been established that in ancient Iran there existed social groups (the Iranian word for these groups—*pishtra*—like *varna* means colour) which corresponded to the first three Indian categories. This would therefore indicate apparently that the division of society into three social estates dates from the Indo-Iranian period, while certain data provide grounds for assuming that this began even earlier.

In the *Rig-Veda* there are numerous references to the first three *varnas* (Brahmins, *kshatriyas* and *vaishyas*), but it is only in the tenth part (*mandala*) that we find the legend explaining the origins of all four *varnas* from *Purusha*. In the hymn *Purusha-sukta* it is written that the Brahmins sprang from the mouth of *Purusha*, the *kshatriyas* from the arms, the *vaishyas* from the thighs and the *shudras* from the feet.

In Vedic literature of the later period this theme recurs frequently but the appearance of *varnas* is associated with the supreme god Brahman. The emergence of the four *varnas* and their status were sanctified by the priests (Brahmins) who went out of their way to substantiate the supremacy of the Brahman group and lend a divine aspect to their status. It is therefore quite understandable that in almost all Vedic texts it is the Brahmins who are named before the other *varnas*. The Brahmins zealously defended their privileges connected with divine worship and the performance of religious rites and their knowledge of religious texts. In practice however the real power was in the hands of the warrior estate, the *kshatriyas*.

As a rule it was representatives of the *kshatriyas* who became kings; the *kshatriyas* stood at the head of state administration and they controlled the vital instrument of power—the army—and held the leading military posts. In the later Vedic texts we already find mention of rivalry between the *kshatriyas* and the Brahmins, and in the epics this struggle is described in considerable detail.

Despite the differences in status, the Brahmins and the *kshatriyas* constituted the privileged and wealthy group, who enjoyed their position at the expense of the working population and bondmen.

The numerically most important *varna* was that of the *vaishyas*, which embraced the freemen from the village communities, the cultivators and merchants. It was the *vaishyas* who paid the bulk of the taxes. In the Vedic age the *vaishyas* still retained certain political rights and even participated in deciding certain affairs of state.

The three higher *varnas* were regarded as the “twice-born” ones, and members of these *varnas* were entitled to *upanayana*, i. e., initiation into Vedic ritual; *shudras* were not twice-born and were therefore excluded from participating in Vedic ritual or studying

sacred texts. The *shudras* as a rule were poor people, economically dependent on those richer than themselves; they provided the lowest categories of artisans and servants. Although the *shudras* were not slaves, they could at any moment find themselves in a position of slave-like dependence. Representatives of the higher groups strove to consolidate the *varnas* as an unassailable hereditary institution, to prevent mixing with representatives of the *shudras* and penetration by the latter of the ranks of the "twice-born".

The fact that there are no references to the *shudras* in the early mandalas of the *Rig-Veda* led some scholars to regard them as native inhabitants, whom the Aryans had subjugated. This was how there emerged the idea of Aryan superiority, their racial purity, of suppression by the Aryans of coloured natives, whom they reduced to *shudra* status. Adherents of this theory emphasised the point that one of the meanings of the word *varna* is colour. However, it should be remembered that the word *varna* is not used to designate skin colour. In ancient India, just as in ancient Iran, there existed a tradition of colour symbolism; a specific colour was associated with each *varna*.

In the latter part of the Vedic age there arose within the *varnas* smaller rigid subdivisions based on occupation which later took the form of castes.

#### THE ANCIENT DYNASTIES AND STATES OF NORTHERN INDIA

In the Vedic writings and in the epics there are references to numerous ancient dynasties and the names of ancient states in the valley of the Ganges; however, the historical reliability of these data is very much open to question and in most cases has not yet been borne out by archeological evidence. The epics contain lists of dynasties that vary from one work to another, and present different accounts of events, all of which complicates the task of the Indologist in his attempt to reconstruct the history of that period. Religious ideas dating from the Vedic and epic periods have brought about a situation where the origins of kings and royal dynasties are explained with reference to the will of the gods. According to the most widespread traditions the main dynasties in the Ganges valley were the Solar and Lunar dynasties whose founders were regarded as descendants of the Sun and Moon gods. The hero of the *Ramayana*, Rama, was associated with the Solar dynasty and the line of the Kauravas was associated with the Lunar dynasty. The king Bharata, whose name is mentioned in the *Rig-Veda*, was traditionally regarded as a descendant of this line.

In the *Rig-Veda* there are certain data relating to political history but the reliability of all these facts is somewhat suspect. The hymns tell for instance of the battle of the ten kings, the clash between the Tritsu tribe (from the Bharata alliance) led by king Sudas and tribes

which were presumably local, non-Aryan in origin, since they are designated as those who do not offer sacrifices. A case in point here, evidently, is the constant rivalry between the Vedic and local tribes. In the *Rig-Veda* age the Bharatas most likely lived in the area between the Sarasvati (an ancient tributary of the Indus) and the Yamuna.

The Puru tribes enjoyed particular influence over the Vedic tribes. One of their rulers is referred to in the *Rig-Veda* as the conqueror of a tribe of *mlechchhas*, i.e., local non-Aryan tribes. Later the Purus joined an alliance of tribes known as the Kuru (the Kauravas). A large number of other tribes are also mentioned in the *Rig-Veda* which later were to play a significant part in the history of ancient India; these include the Chedi, Gandharas, Kikatas (the ancient name for the Magadhas).

The name Bharata was enshrined in special glory. In honour of that illustrious king the whole of Northern India was referred to even in ancient times as Bharatavarsha—"the land of the descendants of Bharata". (At the present time the Republic of India is officially known as Bharat.) Certain of the heroes in the *Mahabharata* come from Bharata's line: the poem tells of the great war fought by the descendants of Bharata.

The confrontation between the Kauravas and the Pandavas at the field of Kuru—Kurukshetra—is one of the main episodes in the epic writings of this age. The question as to the authenticity of the historical detail connected with this battle is the subject of fierce controversy among Indologists. Many scholars regarded the description of the battle as that of a real event which took place almost as long ago as the fourth or third millennium B.C. Contemporary Indologists tend to date the battle as having taken place somewhere between the eleventh and ninth centuries B.C. Important findings with bearing on this controversy were those made by Indian archeologists (led by B. B. Lal) at Hastinapur which is referred to in the *Mahabharata* as the main city of the Kauravas.

To judge by excavations the city of Hastinapur was abandoned by its inhabitants between the eleventh and ninth centuries B.C. as a result of flooding: these facts tie in with the data provided in the *Mahabharata*.

Regardless of whether or not the bloody battle of Kurukshetra actually took place or was no more than a subject of myth, that can, in the opinion of some scholars, be traced back to the Indo-Iranian period, the long rivalry between the tribes of Northern India undoubtedly led to the assertion of power by certain tribes over the rest. It is revealing to note that it was commonly accepted in ancient Indian writings that the battle of Kurukshetra marked the beginning of the new age. The Panchala and Kuru tribes, which according to the epic poem were the strongest and most influential, lost their political influence and the small states of Eastern India appeared on the political arena, in particular Koshala (with its capitals in Ayodhya and



Shravasti), Kashi (capital Varanasi) and Videha (capital Mithila). To the south of modern Bihar there arose the state of Magadha (capital Girivraja and later Rajagriha) and to the west Avanti (capital Ujjayini).

In later Vedic literature there are references to the division of the country into three parts: Aryavarta (the land of the Aryans)—the northern kingdom, Madhya-desha—the middle kingdom and Dakshinapatha—the southern kingdom. There are also references to a division into five parts—the middle, eastern, western, southern and northern lands.

The authors of the *Samhitas* and *Upanishads* of the later Vedic period were well acquainted with the whole of Northern India, many regions of Central India (that is to the north of the Narbada) and Eastern India. By that time the main outlines of the political map with which the sources of the next Magadha-Mauryan period were to deal had already been established.

## THE RELIGION AND CULTURE OF THE VEDIC AGE

### Vedic Religion, Mythology and Rites

Vedic texts enable us to acquaint ourselves with and study the religious views of the ancient Indians of the Vedic age and their mythology.

The beliefs of the Vedic tribes took shape and crystallised over an extremely long period of time, and particular stages of that process are reflected in various Vedic writings. However the Vedic religion or Vedism can, with certain reservations, be regarded as a well-defined system, a whole complex of religious (and, in part, religious and philosophical) beliefs together with corresponding rites and ceremonies. Within this system a number of specific beliefs can be singled out. These are either extremely archaic beliefs reflecting primitive social relations, or others that can be traced back to the ancient culture of the Indo-Europeans or the Indo-Iranians, or finally concepts that emerged as a result of the development of Vedic society itself in the period when the first Indian states were taking shape.

Vedism is the most ancient system of religious beliefs in India and it was to exert a major influence on later religious trends and philosophical teachings in the sub-continent, although, unlike Buddhism, it did not penetrate beyond.

An essential element of the Vedic religion is polytheism—worship of a large number of gods and divinities endowed with anthropomorphism.

The Indians of the Vedic age endowed various phenomena of Nature and also their gods with human attributes, human vices and virtues. Certain other gods encountered in the *Rig-Veda* are endowed

with terriormorphism, appearing in the form of animals, and maintain a fundamental link with the phenomena of Nature (the god Indra is sometimes represented as a bull and the god Agni as a steed). It was to the gods that they addressed their hymns, it was to the gods that sacrifices were offered. In their hymns the Vedic peoples asked the gods to send them more cattle, victory in battle, good harvests, or to free them from disaster and ruin. In the *Rig-Veda* a certain attempt can be traced to classify the gods. They can be more or less divided into three groups corresponding to the Vedic Indians' general concept of the tri-partite division of the world into heaven, earth and *antariksha* (the space between heaven and earth). Each of these three spheres had its corresponding gods. The heavenly gods included the Sun-god Surya, Ushas, the goddess of dawn, and Varuna, "the upholder of moral order". Among the terrestrial gods those held in highest esteem were the god of fire Agni and Soma, god of the holy intoxicating juice. Among the divinities of the *antariksha* were the god of storms Rudra, the god of wind Vayu and the mighty Indra. There is good reason to believe that these concepts of the Vedic tribes were linked to an older mythological conception of the tri-partite division of the world, which is to be found in the history of a number of other Indo-European peoples.

Alongside these very ancient gods which can be compared with Indo-European and Indo-Iranian mythological concepts (some of the Vedic gods for example provide clear parallels with Greek divinities \*) the Vedic pantheon also contained "strictly Indian" gods. Their worship took shape at the time when the Vedic Aryans were advancing across Indian territory.

One of the most popular gods with whose name many major natural phenomena were linked was Indra. Two hundred and fifty hymns in the *Rig-Veda* are dedicated to him (almost a quarter of the total number in the collection).

Indra is represented as a titanic figure, wielder of the thunderbolt, who easily slays with lightning thousands of foes. This brave warrior slays the giant serpent Vritra, who swallowed up the waters. Indra carries out numerous functions and features in a number of myths, all of which reflect his anthropomorphism.

The ancient Indians believed that the god Varuna ruled over the whole of the firmament round which he travelled on a chariot. He is the defender of order (*rita*) on earth and therefore it is he who determines the movements of the heavenly bodies and the actions of men. He upholds the earth, the heavens and the atmosphere, he ordains the sequence of the seasons. Varuna is unsparing in his reckonings with the sinful, but merciful unto the innocent and

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\* The Sky-god Dyaus can be likened to the Greek god Zeus (Roman Jupiter), the Sun-god Surya to the Greek god Helios, Varuna to Uranus, Ushas, the goddess of dawn, to Eos, etc.—*Auth.*

repentant. He even lays down moral standards for the gods. There are ethical aspects to his image which were to be elaborated in particular detail in subsequent religious and philosophical systems of ancient India.

An interesting and unusual figure is Rudra, the god of storms, who unlike the other deities possesses negative qualities. In the *Rig-Veda* he is assigned only secondary importance. The god Rudra is only entitled to take what the other gods do not accept from among the sacrifices offered them. Some scholars suggest that the figure of Rudra was taken over by the Aryans from the local tribes, through which fact they seek to explain his particular position in the Vedic pantheon. Later Rudra, the celestial healer, was to become one of the most popular of all gods—Shiva.

The Vedic tribes were also familiar with the god Vishnu. In the *Rig-Veda* a mere six hymns are dedicated to him, which tell how Vishnu traversed the universe in three strides. This legend assumed particular importance in the Hindu faith, in the context of which Vishnu was to become one of the principal gods.

A prominent place in the Vedic pantheon was occupied by the gods Agni and Soma. Agni was of fundamental importance with regard to religious rites, for it was only with his help that men were able to send their gifts to the gods. Sacrificial fire was regarded as the source of the gods' immortality. It is stressed in the Vedic hymns that the gods achieved immortality thanks to Agni. It was due to this that he provided the link, as it were, between gods and men. So it was with good reason that Agni was known as the messenger or ambassador. The cult of Agni could evidently be traced back to a very ancient conception of fire as the source of well-being in the family. In the *Rig-Veda* Agni is referred to as the protector of the household.

One hundred and twenty hymns in the *Rig-Veda* are dedicated to Soma, god of the holy intoxicating drink. Like Agni, Soma was also regarded as instrumental to the immortality of the gods. The gods strove to partake of this immortal drink. It was also sought after by men who held that it enabled them to merge with the gods as one.

Apart from benevolent gods, the Indians of the Vedic age believed in the existence of evil spirits and demons—*rakshasas*, and the *asuras*—enemies of the gods.

In the later Vedic age there emerged a group of "abstract" divinities. This included divinities whose functions were vague and who were not connected in any way with the tri-partite model of the world: the goddess of speech Vach, and the deity of faith Shraddha, to name only two of them. The singling out of this group resulted from the development of pantheistic ideas, a development which even made itself felt in the *Rig-Veda*, but was to assume particular importance in the later Vedic and epic mythology. In the overall

mythological pattern of the *Rig-Veda* the tri-partite world was not the only model, however it does facilitate a certain amount of classification within the realm of Vedic mythology.

A characteristic feature of the Vedic beliefs was the absence of any clear-cut individualisation of the gods or clear-cut distribution of their functions.

The deification of the forces of nature in the Vedic hymns for the most part took the form of anthropomorphism, which led to a certain degree of syncretism in the description of the gods. Furthermore, the same phenomena of Nature are to be found associated with various gods. There is no firmly stipulated hierarchy for the gods; but rather something in the way of an all-embracing essence intrinsic to a whole number of gods. At any moment a god might be turned to as the unique, only existing god, to whom would be ascribed those actions and powers, which in other situations might be associated with other gods. This veneration for one god at a time, as opposed to the "One God, the Most High" came to be known as *genotheism* (a term first used by the famous Indologist Max Müller). This feature reflected a certain trend towards a highly specific variety of *monotheism*, that found its most detailed expression in the doctrine of the *Upanishads*.

In the later Vedic age it was the god Prajapati, "lord of creatures", who assumed a position of prominence, yet he too failed to acquire the significance of the one, supreme god. Later the cult of Prajapati was replaced by that of the god Brahma.

It is possible that elements of syncretism in the description of the gods reflect a merging of the mythological concepts of different Vedic tribes.

As Vedism develops, changes come about in the significance of their various gods and their place in the general pattern of Vedic mythology and rites. The ancient gods are almost forgotten; some of the "senior" gods, such as Varuna, lose their position of prominence, and their place is taken by other divinities who earlier had had no particular role to play, for example the god Vishnu.

Vedism absorbed certain of the concepts upheld by local non-Aryan tribes, as the Indo-Aryans spread to ever new regions. This can be seen, for instance, from the magical rituals and incantations of the *Atharva Veda*.

In later Vedic literature a distinct trend is to be observed: Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu gradually emerge as the three principal deities, forming a trinity (*trimurti*).

The Indians of the Vedic age also worshipped various spirits and deified plants, mountains and rivers.

An essential part of the worship of the gods was the ritual of sacrifice. Hymns addressed to the gods were also indispensable to religious practice, although many of them were not ritualistic in character. Ritual was particularly prominent in the worship of Agni and Soma.

Gradually the rites of sacrifice became more and more intricate and this led to the emergence of several groups of priests who conducted various types of religious and ritualistic ceremonies.

Apart from elaborate ceremonies for various special occasions the Indian was required to carry out a number of rites in his everyday life; these made up part of his *dharma* (code of day-to-day behaviour and moral principles).

Special rites were performed at the birth of children, at marriage and to mark the death of relatives. Worship of ancestors also had an important part to play.

Particular importance was attached to sacrificial rites in the later Vedic texts—the *Brahmanas*. The Vedic god, Prajapati, is here represented as the god of sacrifice. Man's performance of sacrifice came to be regarded as his main desert, as the measure of his virtue; it was seen as the foundation of life that provided both gods and men with their *raison d'être*. Sacrifice and incantation made it possible for not only the gods but also men to attain immortality: the gods would enable a man's line to continue, bringing him descendants and happiness.

The Brahman priests sought to consolidate this belief; it was believed that they passed through a moment of complete identity with the gods during the ritual, and that they alone were held capable of correctly distributing the sacrifices among the gods.

To judge by the content of the *Rig-Veda* the ceremony for the offering of sacrifice took the following form. Sacrificial straw was placed on a special platform to provide a place for the gods, as it were. Sacrificial fire was then lit and some soma juice, or milk, was then poured on the flames, grains of corn were scattered or animals sacrificed.

Initially the Vedic tribes did not have temples, but later, possibly due to the influence of local religious practice, special buildings for worship appeared.

Scholars are not in agreement as to whether or not pictorial representation of the gods was practised in the Vedic age. Some passages from the Vedic texts would seem to imply that anthropomorphic portrayals of the gods were already to be found at this point.

### **Epic Mythology**

The mythology to be found in the epic poems is in general different from Vedic mythology, although some themes and concepts do echo those of the earlier period. As in the *Vedas*, in the epic mythology the elements of polytheism and anthropomorphism are clearly reflected in the portrayal of certain deities; some features of a Particular brand of pantheism are also present. On the other hand, some parts of the

overall mythology as found in the epic poems are lent new emphasis and content.

In the mythology of the epic poems two traditions emerge: the archaic tradition which reflects concepts pertaining to the Vedic or pre-Vedic (Indo-Iranian) periods, and the epic tradition which reflects new trends linked with the ensuing prominence of the three gods Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma. It is this second tradition which ties in the epic mythology with Hinduism that was to develop later.

Vishnu in the epic poems, as in the *Vedas*, is associated with Indra and he also traverses the universe in "three strides", however in the epic poems it is Vishnu who plays the leading role in this "alliance". Vishnu, as portrayed in the epic poems, is vested with rare powers: it is he who preserves, creates and destroys everything that exists, i. e., at this stage the three functions which later, in the Hindu tradition, are divided between the trinity of gods—Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma, are associated with Vishnu alone.

It is revealing to note that Brahma performs the same functions as Vishnu. This syncretism in relation to the properties of the principal gods points to the fact that in the epic poems there was not yet any clear demarcation between the functions of the gods, and the idea of the "united triad" of gods had not yet taken shape.

It is in the epics that we first encounter the god of war Skanda. Another interesting development is the transformation of the figures of Indra and Varuna. In the *Vedas* Indra had occupied the leading place in the pantheon. In the epics it is the warrior-in-chief, the god Skanda, who possesses his powers. The god Varuna ceases to be the one who preserves order in the universe (*rita*), and is now only a god of secondary importance.

The complexity of the mythology as found in the epic poems can most likely be attributed to the fact that the content of the poems themselves relate to a variety of planes: side by side with more or less archaic writings are texts of a much later date. This is particularly striking in the case of the figure of Rama. In the early parts of the *Ramayana* Rama is presented as a man, who is not endowed with any divine attributes, whereas in later passages of the poem he appears as an incarnation of Vishnu.

Another interesting figure is that of Krishna, who is portrayed not only as the leader of a tribe and friend of the Pandavas, but also as one of the incarnations of Vishnu, as a supreme being and finally as a god who is "the foundation of the whole world". However these transformations in the portrayals of epic characters reflected new features in the people's philosophy and beliefs: Vaishnavism had now appeared on the scene and was rapidly gaining ground in the second half of the first millennium B.C.

## Vedic Literature

The *Vedas* are the most ancient writings of India, although they embrace a very wide content and incorporate texts dating from more than one historical period. In keeping with ancient tradition it is customary to divide them into several groups of texts. First of all come the collections of hymns or *Samhitas*: *Rig-Veda* (a collection of hymns), the *Sama Veda* (a collection of chants), the *Yajur Veda* (a collection of prayers and formulas for sacrifices) and the *Atharva Veda* (a collection of incantations and formulas for magic). Then come the *Brahmanas*—interpretations of the ritual texts of the *Samhitas*, the *Aranyakas* (“forest books”) composed for hermits, and the *Upanishads*, religious-cum-philosophical treatises.

The most ancient of these writings is the *Rig-Veda* which was compiled at the end of the second millennium B.C. and the beginning of the first. It consists of 1,028 hymns on a wide range of themes and includes cosmogonic and wedding hymns. At a somewhat later date the *Atharva Veda* was written down: originally it was evidently composed by the Vedic tribes of Eastern India, although it includes some very ancient texts. A number of the hymns in the *Atharva Veda* echo the beliefs of non-Aryan local tribes.

The *Samhitas* consist mainly of collections of texts widely disparate in character, yet at the same time these ancient collections of writings can be regarded as literary works that reflect a long tradition of popular art handed down by word of mouth. The authors of the *Samhitas* were regarded as seers (*rishi*); the texts were learnt by heart and were sung by ancient bards. Even the most ancient hymns of the *Rig-Veda* were composed with strict observance of metrical rules that were also used in poetry of a later date. One of the metric forms, *anushtubha*, provided the basis for a subsequent one—*shloka*—which was the principal metric form used in these ancient Indian writings.

Many of the hymns describe nature and human emotions in such poetic form and with such rich imagery that they can be regarded as models of poetry. Particularly inspired are the hymns addressed to the goddess of dawn, Ushas. Taken as a whole these were essentially works of religious literature, yet they often resemble secular literature being rooted in everyday life and popular tradition. This feature of many Vedic texts reflects the specific character of Vedism in general, the anthropomorphic quality of many of its concepts. The gods were regarded as closely resembling human beings, and in the hymns addressed to them their authors described their own experiences and feelings, telling of their joys and sorrows.

In Vedic literature and even in the *Rig-Veda* elements of drama are to be found, that will be elaborated more fully in later periods of literature. An interesting example of this is provided in the so-called “hymns in dialogue” found in the *Rig-Veda*. It may be assumed that

they were not simply religious incantations but were designed for theatrical presentations. Some of the *Rig-Veda* legends provided writers of subsequent ages with subject matter for dramatic writings. The great Indian poet Kalidasa, for example, took as the basis for his play *Vikramorvashi* (Urvashi Won by Valour), the Vedic legend which tells of the love of the hero Pururavas for the celestial nymph Urvashi.

A number of hymns in Vedic literature are devoted to the struggle between good and evil forces, between powerful gods and demons, between the various tribes. Particularly colourful is the tale of the Battle of the Ten Kings, when the powerful ruler Sudas succeeded only with the help of the god Indra in escaping defeat by crossing the raging waters of the river Parushni. Scholars rightly regard the *Rig-Veda* as the initial source for the heroic epos that is a salient feature of the epic literature. From the literary historian's point of view the *Brahmanas* are less interesting than the *Samhitas*, although in the *Brahmanas* we also find legends and tales, such as the Indian version of the Flood legend, side by side with prosaic interpretations of religious rituals.

Vedic literature also included *Vedangas* which reflected a new stage in the development of scientific knowledge. There were six of these: *Shiksha* (Phonetics), *Vyakarana* (Grammar), *Nirukta* (Etymology), *Kalpa* (Ritual), *Chhandas* (Metrics) and *Jyotisha* (Astronomy). All these texts came under the heading *Shruti* as opposed to the *Smriti* of a later literary period.

### Epic Literature

The most remarkable of the epic poems of ancient India are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* which were written down far later, between the fourth century B.C. and the fourth century A.D. However the main subject matter of these poems and many of the stories that went into them undoubtedly stem from the first half of the first millennium B.C. The main content of the *Mahabharata* is concerned with the struggle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas which terminated in the battle at Kurukshetra which lasted for eighteen days.

The *Ramayana* tells of the campaign undertaken by the king Rama to Lanka to set free his beloved, Sita, who had been captured by the wicked demon Ravana. Some scholars are inclined to regard the *Mahabharata* as the portrayal of real events supposed to have taken place at the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium B.C.: the subject matter of the *Ramayana* is often interpreted as a recollection of the struggle between the Aryans and the peoples of Southern India. Regardless of whether or not the events described are historically authentic, both works are indisputably rooted in popular tradition that spreads back over many centuries.



Some scholars see the *Ramayana* as a literary presentation of the Indo-Aryans' penetration from the north as far as distant Lanka (Sri Lanka of today).

Both poems are truly enormous collections: the *Mahabharata* has almost 100,000 couplets (*shlokas*) and the *Ramayana*, 24,000.

Apart from the main themes in these poems we find a host of inserted episodes. In the *Mahabharata* these occupy almost three-quarters of the text. Certain of these episodes are myths which sometimes have no bearing on the main narrative, or whole stories such as the poem about Nala and Damayanti, and exhortations. Despite this, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are extremely well integrated works, not mosaics consisting of a variety of texts, but unified works, and each is a compositional whole. The authorship of the *Mahabharata* is traditionally ascribed to Vyasa, and the *Ramayana* to the poet Valmiki but nothing definite is known of these poets or seers (*rishi*). It would seem that Vyasa and Valmiki were folk bards, but unlike many others they were so famous that their names have been passed down from generation to generation. The fact that these poems were handed down by word of mouth for several centuries left its mark on their style and language.

These poems provide posterity with veritable encyclopedias of ancient India. They contain most interesting material on various aspects of social and cultural life, the political organisation and everyday life of the ancient Indians. It would probably be true to say that in India these poems are unrivalled in popularity. In ancient times and in the middle ages they were famed far beyond India's frontiers: in Eastern and Southern Asia, and also in the Far and Middle East. Translations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* into a number of European languages were widely acclaimed. Many outstanding figures in the history of Western and Oriental culture, including Beethoven, Heine, Rodin, Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru, were inspired by them. These epic legends still remain some of the best loved literary works in the India of today.

### **The Early Rudiments of Science**

The material contained in the Vedic texts gives the reader not merely an idea of the development of literature in the ancient period but also indicates the level of scientific knowledge attained by this stage, even though the evidence is of a somewhat fragmentary nature.

The religious worship of the Vedic peoples involved a certain familiarity with astronomy. The Indians of the Vedic age were not only familiar with the Sun and the Moon, but also aware of the existence of other planets, and indeed that of whole constellations. Their calendar was elaborated in detail and laid down with precision. The year was divided into twelve months, each of which had thirty days.

The Vedic texts also show the mathematical knowledge that had been achieved in that distant age. Of particular interest here are the *Shulpa-sutras*, or "rules of the cord" (*shulpa*), which outline sets of rules for measurement. These texts lay down methods for measuring altars, the construction of various geometrical figures and elaborate systems of calculation, etc.

The science of medicine had reached a relatively high level at this stage. The Indians were familiar with many human diseases and forms of treatment (involving herbs, special ointments, water treatment, etc.). To judge by early Vedic writings there were already in existence professional healers (*bhishaj*). The *Atharva Veda* is particularly rich in material relating to medicine and it contains a large number of incantations to ward off disease. Side by side with the mythological conceptions are fairly rational observations.

The Indians of the Vedic age linked man's diseases with the wrath of the gods and recovery was seen as a sign of their good will. Special hymns were dedicated to divine healers, *ashvins*, to Varuna and Soma, who were considered the "kings of medicine". At that time magic played an important part in the treatment of disease, but the properties of herbs and methods of their medical application were already known. The *Samhitas* show that healers of that time were familiar with diseases of the eyes, heart, stomach, lungs and skin. The texts contain mention of names for close on three hundred different parts of the body.

The findings of archeologists and written sources provide some idea of the material culture of that period and also of the everyday life of the ancient Indians of the Vedic age.

### **The *Upanishads* and Their Teaching**

It is customary in India to classify the *Upanishads* as the final part of Vedic literature. They comprise a group of texts that include various religious and philosophical interpretations of Vedic myths and rites. The *Upanishads* were also known as the *Vedanta* or the end of the *Vedas*. This name was later adopted by one of the schools of philosophy which more than any other claimed to be based strictly on ancient religious and philosophical thought. The injunctions of the Vedic religion were being elaborated in increasingly concrete terms with the passage of time. A parallel development was the singling out from the overall system of certain independent motifs: the works elucidating these motifs became prototypes for subsequent scientific treatises.

Essentially the texts of the *Upanishads* represented both the culmination of the Vedic period in Indian culture and also its natural limit. The conceptions evolved during the whole of the era preceding them were subjected in their entirety to an original and interesting

reappraisal in the *Upanishads*. Proceeding from a basically traditional approach, the authors of these texts were able to resolve problems extending far beyond the scope of Vedic themes. The result of this inspired attainment can be seen in the ambivalent role played by the *Upanishads* throughout India's subsequent cultural evolution. For the generations that followed they embodied the most archaic and hence particularly revered sphere of culture, while at the same time they became an intrinsic part of a new range of religious and philosophical concepts already far removed from Vedism. In Indian history they thus came to represent the vital connecting link between two eras of history, and in the broader sense the symbol of continuity for the whole cultural tradition. The etymology of the name *Upanishads* has still not been completely resolved. More likely than not it indicates the way in which the texts were transmitted: the teacher would expound them to his pupils sitting at his feet (*upa + ni + shad*—to sit near), and later they were interpreted as "secret knowledge". The commonly agreed number of *Upanishads* is 108, but of these only 13 are regarded as the most ancient texts: they were composed between the seventh and fourth centuries B.C. and came to be called the basic ones. The most important of these—the *Brihadaranyaka* and the *Chandogya*—are also the earliest of the *Upanishads*. The narrator in these works is usually some revered teacher or sage (these teachers were most likely historical characters). The main theme of these exhortations and deliberations is a correct reading of the *Vedas*; their immediate meaning is assumed to be already familiar, it is treated here as allegorical or as an allusion to the true, "hidden" meaning, to the elucidation of which this whole group of texts is devoted.

In essence the *Upanishads* represent the first attempt to explain the world within the framework of a single teaching. Through these texts there runs one clearly defined idea: on each occasion the authors of the *Upanishads* expound it in a different way, but its essence remains unchanged. Its most concise formulation consists of a mere six words: "Atman is Brahman, Brahman is Atman." Many of these texts are devoted to interpretation of this dictum. The course of discussion is usually as follows: the world is essentially in a state of uninterrupted change; this change finds expression not only in the transformation of external objects, but affects to an equal degree the "spiritual world".

The *Upanishads* proceed from the ancient animistic beliefs and formulate the so-called doctrine of *Karma*, which later was to permeate not only orthodox doctrines but also such religious teachings as Jainism and Buddhism. The doctrine of *Karma* stipulated that everything is determined by the moral law; each thing possesses a soul, the soul is born and dies, and later reappears in one form or another, depending upon man's actions in his previous life; a man who degraded himself by immoral actions is born again in the form of an animal, plant or stone, but through upright behaviour he can raise himself up even from a fossil to human form once again.

Apart from directly perceptible phenomena this scheme of things embraces (albeit in a somewhat contrived way) the whole world of demons and deities born of Vedism: the soul can raise itself up as high as divine rank, taste the joys of paradise or sink as low as hell, but no state (and this is where the *Upanishads* reveal a marked departure from Vedic tradition) is permanent; even the gods to whom sacrifices are offered are only names of states in which specific souls find themselves. Here the *Karma* emerges as an instrument which subordinates the whole diversity of the phenomena perceived by man to a specific unifying principle.

In the *Upanishads*, the *Karma* doctrine accords with the conception of the eternal flow of life—*Samsara*. These two concepts taken together were to become an integral part of many religious and philosophical systems in India, where the doctrines of *Karma* and *Samsara* were subsequently to be elaborated in far more detail. The *Upanishads* are not confined to a description of the infinite fluidity and interconnection of phenomena: they tend rather to treat this whole pattern of ideas as something in the way of an overture to the central part of their teaching, the identification of the *Atman* (the inner ego of each being) with the Brahman (i.e., the impersonal, all-embracing divine essence of the entire world). But this is more than just an attempt to establish some primordial unity of all the diverse forms of existence, it is the corner-stone of a minutely elaborated code of behaviour, the nature and aims of which have undeniable religious implications.

It is clear that in a number of places the *Upanishads* reveal marked differences with Vedic teaching, precisely because their authors found the latter teaching insufficiently profound in the religious sense. Many traditional tenets are interpreted in them in a new light and new explanations are offered. The Vedic Indian revered his traditional gods, endowed with many very mundane characteristics, for the good fortune they sent him in return for his sacrifices. The *Upanishads* present a very different teaching. There are no personal gods, just as there is no personal man, limited in terms of space or time. Man resembles all other creatures, in that he is part of the unending cycle of existence, the whole indestructible integrity of which is found in every atom. The flow of life is eternal, and all living things in the universe are subject to it. Man is the only one of all the "atoms" capable of apprehending the essence of this process, and later even of achieving inner liberation from all the fetters of life. Yet, despite all this, man returns to a terrestrial existence and once again takes up his place in the unending cycle of births.

The ideal of the *Upanishads* is the seer who does not intervene in the affairs of the world, remaining indifferent to all upheavals and passions, even to religion itself. After recognising that he is part of everything around him and equating himself with the world so to speak, what more should he desire? He is above the elements and the

gods; he alone has attained an existence which is as eternal and indestructible as the world itself, or what the *Upanishads* present as the world's constant symbol, the Brahman.

These and many other conceptions and ideas go to make up the strictly speculative philosophical system of the *Upanishads*, which is cut off from real life. Yet at the same time it is not only idealist views and concepts that are to be found in the *Upanishads*, but rationalistic ones as well. Moreover in these texts there clearly emerges not only a complex coexistence of these two trends but also rivalry between them, a phenomenon still under the surface in the earlier texts of the *Brahmanas* and the *Aranyakas*. In the *Upanishads* it is to the three seers Shandilya, Yajnavalkya and Uddalaka that the highest esteem is shown. The first two are presented as adhering to the fundamental idealist concept, the identification of *Atman* and Brahman (it is not without reason that orthodox tradition referred repeatedly to their doctrines), while Uddalaka gave voice to realistic ideas coming very close to a spontaneous variety of materialism. He interprets boldly, in a way all his own, the cosmogonic hymns of the *Vedas*, ruling out any special role played by the gods in creating the universe. Uddalaka endows Nature with the main creative force; in his opinion all that exists in the world (and this means both physical and mental processes, including consciousness) is the product of material elements. Even the conception of *Atman* is interpreted in a different light: *Atman* is presented as the initial material human base.

It is quite natural that ideas of this sort should appear in the wake of the advance of the ancient Indians' natural-scientific knowledge and as a result of major social change. Taken all in all the concepts found in the *Upanishads* were to exert an enormous influence on the whole of India's subsequent cultural development.

The *Karma* doctrine that is found in the *Upanishads* constituted one of the basic principles of Indian religions. It also possessed specific social implications, insofar as it provided an answer to the crucial question as to the reason behind human suffering and adversity. Not the gods but man was declared the judge of his actions, and human sufferings were not acknowledged as eternal. Some of the principles laid down in the *Upanishads* were later used in Buddhist and Jaina teachings (see below). Later the materialist school—*Lokayata*—turned to the "materialist current" in the overall teaching of the *Upanishads*. Many of the ideas found in the *Upanishads* had a major influence on the philosophers and writers of the Middle Ages, and on cultural developments in modern and contemporary history, not only within India itself but also far beyond her borders.